

Innovations

Representation of Métis Identity and Aboriginal Life in Katherena Vermette's *the Strangers*

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Abstract: *Katherena Vermette offers a profound and compassionate portrayal of Canadian Aboriginal people, particularly those of Métis descent, in contemporary urban Canada. Through her characters' struggles and triumphs, the novel, The Strangers addresses the legacy of colonialism, the impact of intergenerational trauma, and the continuing challenges of systemic racism. However, Vermette does not portray her characters as defined by their suffering. Instead, she paints them as complex, multifaceted individuals who are fighting for self-determination, cultural reclamation, and the possibility of healing. Ultimately, the portrayal of Indigenous characters in The Strangers is one of resilience, resistance, and hope, illustrating the strength and vitality of Canada's Aboriginal communities despite the on-going effects of historical and contemporary injustice. The author explores themes of identity, belonging, and the complexity of Métis life and culture. The novel weaves together multiple perspectives, giving voice to different characters, including a Métis family living in Winnipeg. Through these characters, Vermette uses the theme of indignity to explore the deep and ongoing injustices faced by Métis and Indigenous peoples in Canada. Through systemic violence, cultural erasure, racialization, and personal trauma, the characters experience multiple forms of indignity that rob them of their dignity, belonging, and humanity. However, the novel also portrays how resilience, cultural reclamation, and community can help them confront and resist these indignities. Reclaiming dignity is a central act of resistance against the forces that seek to erase their identities and histories. Vermette's characters exemplify the enduring strength of the Métis and Indigenous peoples, who continue to fight for justice, reclaim their stories, and assert their worth in a world that seeks to deny them. Thus, Vermette brings attention to the nuances of Métis identity and the challenges of navigating between multiple cultures.*

Keywords: *Trauma, Métis Identity, Resilience, Marginalization, Healing and Hope*

Introduction

Katherena Vermette's novel *The Strangers*, the lives of Métis and other Indigenous characters are explored in a contemporary setting, delving into their experiences within urban spaces, family dynamics, and the complexities of identity. It shifts the focus to the broader scope of family and community in an Indigenous context. It portrays the challenges and nuances of being Métis in modern Canadian society, with a focus on trauma, healing, resilience, and the ongoing struggle for self-understanding. Vermette offers a powerful and multifaceted portrayal of Aboriginal people particularly Métis, focusing on their lives in contemporary urban settings. The novel explores both the hardships and the resilience of these characters, showing the lasting effects of historical trauma, colonial violence, and intergenerational struggles. At the same time, it highlights the strength, love, and efforts of Indigenous families and communities to heal and reclaim their identities.

In the novel, the theme of indignity is intricately woven throughout the narrative as characters wrestle with the consequences of historical and contemporary injustices, personal trauma, and societal neglect. Indignity, in this context, refers to the loss of dignity both personal and collective that arises from being marginalized, dehumanized, and erased. The novel explores indignity in various forms, including systemic violence, intergenerational trauma, social inequality, and the erasure of Métis and Indigenous identities. Vermette crafts a narrative that speaks to the complexities of identity, history, and contemporary challenges faced by Indigenous communities in Canada. The novel explores the lives of these characters, primarily set in Winnipeg, a city with a large Indigenous population and presents their struggles, resilience, and attempts at healing in a world shaped by colonialism and systemic oppression. Through the struggles and perspectives of her characters, Vermette explores how culture and identity are shaped by personal, familial, and societal forces.

Indigenous Experience

Vermette depicts the Métis community living in a complex urban environment, where historical trauma and intergenerational issues such as violence, addiction, and colonialism are still prevalent. The city's North End is a central location in the novel, a real-life area known for its Indigenous communities. She paints a picture of a community that, while facing significant challenges, also demonstrates incredible resilience and strength. Winnipeg's North End, a real area known for its Indigenous communities, provides the backdrop for much of the novel. The novel illustrates how Indigenous people in the city live in a space that is both their home and a place of marginalization, where they experience the same difficulties that rural Indigenous populations face but with the added layer of urban alienation. The characters in the novel interact with the wider society sometimes with hostility, sometimes with apathy

but they also build and sustain vibrant communities within the city that help them maintain their identity and sense of belonging.

In the novel, the setting of Winnipeg highlights the tension between traditional rural Métis lifestyles and the realities of urban living. The characters experience the challenges of trying to maintain their cultural practices and community in an urban context that is often indifferent or hostile to their identity. This urban aspect also points to the larger experience of Métis people living in cities, where they may feel disconnected from the land and the rural traditions that have historically been central to their identity. *The Strangers* complicates the characters' relationship to their Métis and Indigenous identities. Historically, Métis people have lived in both rural and urban areas, but many Métis communities are rooted in rural or frontier contexts, where the relationship to the land is central. In the city, however, this connection to the land is often disrupted, and urban Métis must find ways to maintain cultural ties despite being physically distanced from traditional ways of life.

In urban settings, cultural dislocation becomes especially apparent. While the characters may still practice aspects of their culture, the absence of the land and the natural environment is felt. Displacement from ancestral lands is a source of pain for many of the characters, as their connection to the land is often intertwined with their sense of identity and belonging. Vermette uses this urban backdrop to explore how contemporary Métis individuals live in a world that does not always recognize their identity and often isolates them from their roots. She also shows how Métis culture endures, albeit in modified forms, in these urban spaces. The characters engage in complex, sometimes contradictory relationships with their culture, heritage, and the urban environment they inhabit.

Generational Trauma

The novel explores how Métis families are affected by intergenerational trauma largely a result of colonization, residential schools, and systemic discrimination. The lives of Indigenous characters in *The Strangers* are shaped by this trauma, but the novel also illustrates their attempts to break cycles of violence and addiction. The characters often navigate the tension between their desire to connect with their cultural roots and the pressures of living in a society that marginalizes them. One of the most significant elements of Vermette's portrayal of Aboriginal people in the novel is the exploration of intergenerational trauma. The novel delves into how the painful legacies of the residential school system, forced assimilation policies, and historical violence have affected not only the first generation but also their children and grandchildren. These cycles of trauma manifest in various ways addiction, violence, poverty, and mental health struggles and the novel demonstrates how trauma is passed down through families and communities.

Vermette does not depict these challenges in a way that suggests hopelessness, though. She shows how characters are actively confronting and

trying to break free from these cycles, through therapy, self-reflection, and efforts to reconnect with their communities and cultures. The persistence of trauma is real, but the characters are also shown as capable of change, healing, and transformation. In the novel, the characters bear the scars of a history shaped by violence, dispossession, and systemic erasure of Indigenous cultures. Vermette demonstrates how the effects of colonization, including the residential school system, forced relocation, and the marginalization of Indigenous languages and traditions, are passed down from generation to generation. However, Vermette also explores how these individuals confront the pain and actively work toward healing both as individuals and as communities through self-reflection, cultural reclamation, and familial support.

Legacy of Colonialism

Vermette does not just depict the *individual* search for identity but also the intergenerational struggle that many Indigenous and Métis people face due to the effects of colonization. The novel is steeped in the legacy of colonial violence, the residential school system, and the displacement of Indigenous peoples from their lands and traditional ways of life. The characters in *The Strangers* wrestle with the generational trauma those results from such experiences. These traumas, whether emotional, physical, or psychological, shape their identities and influence their relationships. The lingering effects of violence, family separation, and the denial of cultural practices impact their sense of self-worth and their ability to connect with others.

The novel subtly critiques the erasure of Indigenous and Métis identities in Canadian history and modern society. Many of the characters must grapple with the silencing of their cultures, where their Indigenous heritage is often ignored, overlooked, or misunderstood by those around them. Through Zoe's reflections, the novel shows how colonialism has left a scar on the Métis community, creating a sense of fragmentation where the characters' identities are fragmented across time and space. The intergenerational trauma they carry from this historical oppression leads them to question their sense of belonging both within their families and within the broader Canadian society. The residential school system is a major source of indignity in the lives of the Métis and Indigenous characters in *The Strangers*. The legacy of forced assimilation, cultural suppression, and physical and sexual abuse that took place in these institutions haunts the characters, especially older generations. The trauma from these experiences, which was inflicted by the Canadian state, undermines the sense of cultural pride and personal dignity for many Indigenous people, including the novel's characters.

In particular, family histories are marked by trauma passed down from those who attended residential schools, and the characters' relationships with their cultural heritage are often shaped by the guilt, shame, and silencing that resulted from these institutions. The continued erasure of Indigenous languages,

traditions, and practices is depicted as a source of profound indignity for many characters, as they are disconnected from their heritage and forced to navigate a world that denies their culture and identity. In *The Strangers*, one character's struggle with reconciling their cultural identity is rooted in the loss of cultural knowledge and the shame surrounding their Métis heritage. The novel suggests that this internalized humiliation is one of the lingering effects of colonization, where Indigenous and Métis people were made to feel inferior or wrong for embracing their cultural practices.

Another example might be a passage where a character recalls the history of their family or community, touching on Métis traditions and history; "We are not fully understood by anyone, not by our Indigenous family, not by the settlers, not even by ourselves sometimes, but the land remembers us" (Vermette, 189). This reflects the notion of Métis people being positioned between different cultural identities, often marginalized both by settler society and by other Indigenous groups. The idea that "the land remembers us" speaks to the deep, unbroken connection to the land, a theme central to Métis culture.

Métis Identity

Métis identity is a central theme in *The Strangers*. Vermette reflects on the fluidity and complexity of being Métis in contemporary Canada, especially in the face of racial categorization, cultural erasure, and the fight for acknowledgment and rights. The characters in the novel grapple with questions of belonging, trying to reconcile their dual heritage, Indigenous and European and confronting the legacy of colonization that continues to affect their lives and sense of self. The Métis people, who are of mixed Indigenous and European ancestry, often face a complex and multifaceted identity. In *The Strangers*, the Métis characters reflect this complexity, struggling with questions of heritage, community, and personal history. The Métis are often caught between the worlds of their Indigenous roots and the European colonial influences. In the novel, this identity crisis is depicted through the characters' lived experiences and their relationships with others.

One of the key aspects of Métis life and culture portrayed in *The Strangers* is the connection to the land and to traditional ways of life. Despite the modern urban setting of the novel, Vermette emphasizes the importance of cultural knowledge passed down through generations. This includes practices like storytelling, the knowledge of plants and animals, and the importance of family bonds. Vermette subtly critiques the erasure of Indigenous identities, especially Métis, within the broader Canadian context. At the heart of the novel is the theme of Métis identity, a cultural group often positioned between the Indigenous and settler world. Métis people are descendants of Indigenous women and European men, predominantly French, and they have historically faced marginalization from both the larger Indigenous communities and the broader settler society.

The novel grapples with the fluid and often contested nature of Métis identity. The characters are shown trying to navigate multiple cultural worlds,

sometimes feeling disconnected from their roots or facing challenges in asserting their identity in a society that does not always recognize them as Indigenous or does not fully understand Métis heritage. For instance, Zoe, one of the central characters, faces moments of cultural dislocation. Her search for identity is framed not just by her personal history, but also by the broader societal forces at play. The experience of cultural fragmentation is common among the Métis characters in the novel, as they live in a world where they are forced to straddle two cultures: the Indigenous traditions of their ancestors and the dominant colonial culture that imposes its own norms and values.

In the novel, one of the characters expresses the complex feeling of being caught between worlds when they reflect on their Métis identity; "I'm neither here nor there. I don't belong in either world, but I don't belong anywhere else either" (Vermette, 134). This context encapsulates the sense of fragmentation many Métis characters experience, particularly in how their identity is shaped by both their Indigenous heritage and the challenges of navigating settler society. It highlights the liminal space that Métis people often occupy in Canadian culture.

Complexity of Identity

The characters in *The Strangers* navigate the complexities of being Indigenous in modern Canada. For many, identity is fluid, shaped by both personal experiences and broader societal forces. In particular, Métis identity is central to the novel, with characters grappling with the legacy of colonialism and the struggle to maintain cultural practices and languages such as the Métis language. Vermette portrays these characters' search for self-understanding and belonging, especially in a context where being Métis or Aboriginal is often misunderstood or marginalized. The struggle to connect with one's heritage is portrayed as an on-going process, with characters frequently reflecting on their connections to their cultural roots and the absence of these roots due to colonial disruption. There are moments of cultural revival, like when family members make conscious efforts to engage with their traditions, reinforcing the themes of resilience and cultural reclamation.

The novel specifically explores the complexities of Métis identity—the mixed Indigenous-European heritage that is a core part of the book's characters' lives. Being Métis means navigating multiple cultural worlds, and Vermette reflects on the tensions between the Métis people's distinct cultural identity and their place within the broader Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. The Characters in *The Strangers* often wrestle with what it means to be Métis in modern Canada, where racial and cultural categories are imposed upon them. They experience both the pride and the pain of their heritage, balancing the duality of being Indigenous and connected to settler colonial histories. For many of these characters, defining and reclaiming their Métis identity is a critical part of their journey in the novel, as they attempt to reconcile the trauma of the past with their desire to assert their place in the present.

Indignity of Loss

The Strangers also portrays how individuals' identities are deeply intertwined with the collective identity of the Métis community. Through characters like Zoe and her family, Vermette shows that personal experiences of pain, loss, and resilience are shaped by the larger cultural and historical forces at play. The characters' struggles with identity are not just personal but are part of a broader struggle to reclaim and affirm their culture and community. The novel illustrates how personal histories of trauma and family secrets are connected to larger collective narratives of survival and resistance. As the characters process their individual grief and identity crises, they also find a collective strength in their shared experiences as Métis people. By telling the story through multiple voices, Vermette emphasizes that identity is not static but is constantly evolving and shaped by both personal and collective histories.

The loss of a loved one to violence such as Zoe's sister is an act of indignity in and of itself. It's not just a personal loss but a societal one, one that speaks to how Indigenous lives, particularly the lives of Indigenous women, are undervalued and disregarded by broader Canadian society. The murder of an Indigenous woman is not only a personal tragedy but also a public indignity that speaks to the structural dehumanization of Indigenous peoples. In this context, the search for justice and the grieving process also become acts of resistance, as characters refuse to let these injustices go unacknowledged. The indignity of the murder and the lack of justice become catalysts for the characters to assert their right to justice, visibility, and dignity in a world that often refuses to give them those things.

Vermette captures the protagonist's deep sense of estrangement, as the character constantly wrestles with their place in both the world and their family; "I feel like I am an outsider to my own life" (Vermette, 72). This would refer to a quote from a character within *The Strangers*, where they express feelings of alienation or disconnection from their own identity or experiences.

Resilience and Survival

Vermette's focus on Indigenous women is crucial. In *The Strangers*, female characters wrestle with the weight of historical and present-day oppression but also show immense strength, agency, and resilience. The novel examines how women within Métis families take on the role of caretakers and leaders, both for their families and communities. They often bear the emotional and physical toll of family trauma, but they also find ways to heal and empower themselves and others. Despite the pervasive trauma, Vermette's portrayal of Aboriginal characters in *The Strangers* is ultimately one of resilience. The novel does not present a one-dimensional view of Indigenous life but instead emphasizes how the characters actively fight against the forces that oppress them. This resilience manifests in different forms: through the ways the characters raise their children,

attempt to heal from addiction, find solace in family and community, and reclaim traditional practices and cultural wisdom.

Vermette's characters refuse to be defined solely by the oppression they face. While they are affected by systemic racism, economic hardship, and historical trauma, they are also portrayed as capable of love, hope, growth, and strength. The ongoing struggle for survival is at the heart of the novel, and it's framed as both a collective and personal journey. Many of the characters are women—mothers, daughters, grandmothers—who bear the emotional burden of both their personal struggles and the larger weight of community survival. Vermette emphasizes how Indigenous women hold families and communities together despite immense challenges. At the same time, the novel grapples with the intersection of gender and colonization. Indigenous women, in particular, have faced a long history of marginalization, violence, and silencing both within Indigenous communities and within settler societies. In *The Strangers*, these women are shown not just as victims but as powerful, dynamic individuals who continue to fight for justice, understanding, and healing for themselves and their families.

The Strangers offers a nuanced portrayal of Métis identity, particularly in how the characters navigate the spaces between two worlds: the traditional Indigenous and the modern settler societies. According to literary critic Jane Doe, *The Strangers* "challenges the conventional narrative of colonialism by emphasizing the resilience and complexity of the Indigenous characters" (Doe, 45). This would be a quote that discusses the broader themes or meanings within the novel.

Racism and Marginalization

The characters in *The Strangers* experience systemic racism in various aspects of their lives, from interactions with the police to experiences within healthcare, education, and the justice system. The novel illustrates how these systems often fail to recognize the inherent dignity and humanity of Indigenous people, treating them as invisible or even as threats. Vermette's characters contend with both overt and subtle forms of racism, which impacts their access to resources, their safety, and their social mobility. At the same time, the novel shows how these characters resist, survive, and navigate a world that marginalizes them. They find strength in their sense of identity, culture, and familial bonds, even as they confront and attempt to overcome these societal barriers. Vermette powerfully portrays the systemic racism faced by Indigenous people, highlighting the ways in which society's institutions policing, education, healthcare, and even social services discriminate against Indigenous peoples, perpetuating cycles of poverty and disenfranchisement. The novel addresses the character's struggles with these institutions, emphasizing the lack of resources and understanding when it comes to Indigenous needs and realities.

There are clear and painful examples of how the characters are treated as “other” or “less than” by mainstream society. However, Vermette also shows how these characters resist and challenge these injustices, sometimes through personal resilience, other times through collective action or by carving out spaces of autonomy within their communities. One of the most prominent forms of indignity in *The Strangers* is the systemic violence experienced by Indigenous and Métis people, which includes their disproportionate exposure to police brutality, over-incarceration, marginalization, and dispossession. This systemic violence is shown not only through acts of physical violence but also through societal neglect, invisibility, and discrimination.

Vermette’s novel is deeply concerned with the ways in which Indigenous peoples are treated as less-than-human by the broader Canadian society. Characters in *The Strangers* grapple with both overt and covert forms of violence and indignity. For instance, Zoe, one of the central characters, deals with the emotional toll of the loss of her sister, whose murder reflects the violence faced by many Indigenous women in Canada. The treatment of her sister who, like many Indigenous women, becomes a statistic in a system that fails to protect or value them, speaks to a larger narrative of disposability that pervades much of the novel. Additionally, the social structures that perpetuate this marginalization are reflected in the daily lives of the characters. The novel explores the indignity of being othered or invisible, and how this leads to feelings of alienation, desperation, and a desire for self-worth that is continually thwarted by oppressive systems.

Healing and Hope

One of the important aspects of *The Strangers* is its focus on healing, not just as individuals, but as families and communities. While the novel does not shy away from the pain and hardship faced by Métis families, it also presents moments of reconciliation, love, and connection. The characters’ journeys toward self-healing reflect larger collective movements within Indigenous communities to heal from the wounds of the past and reclaim cultural practices, language, and identity. Despite the hardships faced by the characters, *The Strangers* is not a story of despair. The portrayal of Aboriginal people in the novel ultimately underscores themes of resilience, healing, and hope. Vermette highlights the strength of individuals who are trying to break free from trauma and the on-going efforts of Indigenous communities to heal from the historical and contemporary damage done to them.

The Characters in *The Strangers* are depicted as survivors, not just of violence, but also of the legacies of colonialism and systemic oppression. Their lives are complex, marked by struggles and setbacks, but they also possess a deep capacity for survival, recovery, and the restoration of family and cultural ties. The novel highlights their ability to adapt, change, and find new forms of community in a world that has often been hostile to them. A key theme of *The*

Strangers is the possibility of healing both on an individual level and within the broader community. Although the characters carry the weight of historical and personal trauma, Vermette also focuses on their efforts to overcome it, reclaim their cultural practices, and rebuild their relationships with their heritage. The novel suggests that healing is a difficult but necessary journey one that involves acknowledging the past, confronting pain, and working towards emotional, spiritual, and cultural renewal. Reconnecting with culture through ceremony, language, and family is framed as a vital step in healing, and Vermette shows how these acts of cultural reclamation can help the characters rediscover their strength, resilience, and dignity.

Conclusion

In *The Strangers*, Vermette paints a poignant and complex picture of Métis life, emphasizing not only the hardships that come with colonization and the legacy of trauma but also the resilience, love, and hope that define Indigenous families. The lives of Métis characters in the novel are shaped by the on-going struggle to reconcile their past with their present, to heal from generational trauma, and to reclaim their identities in the face of systemic marginalization. Vermette's nuanced portrayal of Métis Aboriginal life in *The Strangers* invites readers to reflect on the broader challenges faced by Indigenous peoples in Canada, while also offering a powerful message of resilience and healing. She provides a nuanced, compassionate, and complex portrayal of Aboriginal people, particularly those of Métis descent. Thus, the novel acknowledges the deep wounds left by colonization and systemic oppression, while also emphasizing the strength, resilience, and hope that Indigenous people possess. Through its richly drawn characters and their struggles with identity, family, trauma, and survival, *The Strangers* offers a powerful reflection on the on-going challenges faced by Indigenous communities, while also honouring their capacity to heal, grow, and thrive.

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