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Literary Theories

Listening Without Hearing: Postcolonial Silence in Margaret Laurence's "The Loons"

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Abstract: What does it mean to hear a cry and still do nothing? Margaret Laurence's short story "The Loons" seems, at first glance, to be a quiet childhood memory told with restraint and nostalgia. However, when viewed through a postcolonial lens, the story becomes a strong commentary on Indigenous displacement, cultural silencing, and colonial guilt in Canada. This paper uses postcolonial theory to explore how Piquette Tonnerre, a Métis girl, symbolizes the colonized subject who is misunderstood, romanticized, and ultimately abandoned by colonial society. The disappearance of the loons reflects the erasure of Indigenous presence, culture, and voice. Through the narrator Vanessa's growing awareness and lasting guilt, Laurence reveals not only overt colonial oppression but also the quieter violence of indifference, misunderstanding, and passive complicity. This paper argues that "The Loons" critiques colonial kindness and shows how sympathy without understanding becomes another form of silence.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Othering, Colonial Silence, Indigenous Erasure, Loons.



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What if the saddest tragedies are not caused by cruelty, but by people who “meant well”? Margaret Laurence’s “The Loons,” from *A Bird in the House* (1970), tells the story of Vanessa MacLeod’s childhood encounter with Piquette Tonnerre, a Métis girl who enters Vanessa’s comfortable settler world. Nothing dramatic occurs at first. There are no clear villains, no open violence. Yet by the end of the story, Piquette is dead, her children are dead, and the loons, the haunting birds of the lake, have vanished. This paper interprets “The Loons” as a postcolonial text that reveals the subtle mechanisms of colonial power: othering, romanticization, neglect, and historical erasure. Using postcolonial theory, especially concepts of otherness, colonial gaze, and silencing, this paper argues that Piquette’s tragedy is systemic rather than individual. She does not simply fail to belong; she is never allowed to belong.

Postcolonial theory looks at the cultural, political, and psychological impacts of colonialism on both the colonized and the colonizers. It examines not just physical domination but also how stories are told, whose voices are heard, and who is pushed into silence. Three key postcolonial ideas are particularly useful for understanding “The Loons”:

1. Othering

Edward Said explains that colonial societies define themselves by defining the colonized as the different, lesser, and unknowable “Other”. Piquette is continually labeled as not one of us. As he quotes, “The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (Said 1), Piquette is imagined rather than understood.

2. Romanticization of the Indigenous

Colonial narratives often depict Indigenous people as “natural,” “primitive,” or mystical. This fantasy ignores real suffering and replaces it with stereotypes. Frantz Fanon explains how colonized subjects are trapped inside identities imposed on them, just like Piquette. “I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the ‘idea’ that others have of me but of my own appearance.” (Fanon, 95)

3. Silence and Erasure

Gayatri Spivak's well-known statement in "Can the subaltern speak?" is relevant here. "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears" (Spivak 306). Piquette speaks, but she is never truly heard.

From the start, Piquette is defined through colonial labels rather than her humanity. She is called a half-breed; a term filled with racial contempt. Vanessa's grandmother states that the Tonnerres are "neither flesh, fowl, nor good salt herring," (Laurence) reducing them to something unnatural and in-between. Piquette belongs nowhere: Not among the Cree, not among the white settlers, not even at school. This in-betweenness reflects the postcolonial condition of the Métis caught between cultures and accepted by neither. Even Vanessa, who later feels guilt, initially sees Piquette as a source of curiosity rather than a person. Vanessa admits that she finds Piquette intriguing only after discovering she is "Indian," imagining her as a "daughter of the forest" (Laurence) who might reveal secrets of nature. This is classic colonial romanticization. When Piquette rejects this fantasy, saying, "I don't know what in hell you're talkin' about," (Laurence) Vanessa feels hurt, not because Piquette is rude, but because she refuses to play the role assigned to her.

Vanessa's father embodies liberal colonial kindness. He genuinely wants to help Piquette. He takes her to Diamond Lake for rest and health. Yet even this kindness has limits.

Piquette is welcomed into the MacLeod household on colonial terms: She must behave, she must be grateful, she must fit quietly into their world, she is never asked what she wants. Vanessa's mother worries about lice. Her grandmother refuses to visit at all. These reactions highlight how deeply colonial fear and disgust persist beneath polite sympathy. Such kindness often upholds power structures rather than breaking them down. Piquette is assisted, but not understood. Protected, but not included. One of the most painful aspects of "The Loons" is the constant failure of connection. Vanessa wants Piquette to love the woods, the lake, the loons which stand as symbols of a romantic Indigenous identity. But Piquette responds with blunt indifference; "Who gives a good goddamn?" (Laurence). This moment is crucial. Piquette refuses the colonial script. She does not want to act like an Indigenous person for white comfort. Her anger, silence, and resistance are her only forms of agency. Vanessa later realizes that she had "the frightened tendency to look the other way." (Laurence). This admission exposes the quiet violence of colonial society.

The loons are not just birds; they represent something deeper. Their cry is described as: “Plaintive, and yet with a quality of chilling mockery.” (Laurence). They belong to a world that existed “before any person ever set foot here.” As cottages increase, the loons disappear. This reflects Indigenous history: First presence, then intrusion, then disappearance. By the end of the story, the lake is renamed with an “Indian” name for tourism, Lake Wapakata, even as real Indigenous lives have been erased. This is colonial irony at its sharpest: Indigenous culture is celebrated after Indigenous people have been destroyed. Piquette’s death is horrifying and tragically ordinary. She dies drunk, trapped in a burning shack, with her children. There is no ceremony. No justice. No outrage. Vanessa’s mother briefly wonders if they could have done more but quickly moves on. This reflects what postcolonial scholars call historical amnesia. The system shrugs and continues. Piquette’s life becomes a mere footnote, just as Indigenous suffering is often reduced to statistics or silence.

As an adult, Vanessa recognizes her failure but her acknowledgment comes too late. She admits she never truly liked Piquette. She felt she should. This moral obligation without emotional connection highlights the emptiness of colonial sympathy. Standing on the government pier, Vanessa realizes the loons are gone. Her final thought is devastating: “Perhaps they had been unable to find such a place, and had simply died out.” (Laurence). This statement could describe the loons, Piquette, or even an entire people. The final line suggests that Piquette, perhaps unconsciously, may have been the only one who truly heard the loons. She understood loss because she lived it.

Through a postcolonial reading, “The Loons” emerges as a quiet but powerful critique of colonial Canada. Margaret Laurence does not accuse through anger; she accuses through absence of missing birds, missing voices, missing lives. The story illustrates that colonial harm does not always shout. Sometimes, it whispers. Sometimes, it politely looks away. Piquette Tonnerre is not destroyed by cruelty alone, but by indifference, misunderstanding, and silence. The loons vanish not because anyone kills them, but because the world changes without caring. And that is perhaps the most postcolonial truth of all.

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