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Cultural Predicaments of Polar Maritime Communities in *Dogsong*

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Abstract: *Dogsong*, a Bildungsroman featuring an Eskimo youth, was published in the mid-1980s, a period when Arctic issues were drawing increasing global attention. The novel adopts innovative narrative forms to represent real-life predicaments faced by Arctic indigenous peoples as well as cultural resilience, which earned the novel the Newbery Medal. The novel's concern with the deterioration of Arctic cultural ecology constitutes its overt social significance, while its underlying shamanic soul-journey narrative structure consolidates this significance. During the dark adventure over the ice, dreams and reality blend into each other, revealing a history of Arctic survival that relies on oral tradition rather than written records. In the novel, dreams, hallucinations, running, and the human–animal transformations serve as impressionistic representations of the shamanic trance state. By reshaping Arctic cultural practices and shamanic cosmology in modern forms and presenting contemporary indigenous life in a manner accessible to readers, the novel develops a distinctive strategy for addressing cultural dilemmas.

Keywords: *Dogsong*; Gary Paulsen; Shamanism; Eskimo; Bildungsroman; Arctic Maritime Culture

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题目：《雪橇犬之歌》：极地海洋民族的文化困境

摘要：以爱斯基摩少年为主角的现代成长小说《雪橇犬之歌》，出版于北极问题备受关注的 1980 年代中期，因其精确反映极地海洋原住民的现实困境，并运用独特的叙事手法呈现走出困境的文化努力而获得纽伯瑞文学奖。从人类学视角来看，小说对北极文化生态恶化的关注是其外显的社会意义，而深层的萨满灵魂旅行叙事结构则以美学的方式巩固了小说的社会意义。在北冰洋的极夜历险中，梦境与现实无缝切换，展现没有文字记载依靠口口相传的北极生存史。小说中梦境、幻觉、奔跑、人与动物间的自由转换是对萨满进入迷狂状态的写意性呈现。将北极特有的文化习俗与萨满宇宙观进行现代形变，以读者可以理解的方式由表及里地呈现当代原住民生活，是小说解决文化困境的独特手法。

关键词：《雪橇犬之歌》；加里·保森；萨满；爱斯基摩；成长小说；极地海洋文化

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Literary representations of American ethnic minorities, especially indigenous peoples, have long been marked by cultural and critical ambivalence. Authors often find it difficult to strike a balance in representing folk culture: while white writers may be accused of catering to colonialism and Orientalist voyeurism, ethnic minority writers may face charges of self-Orientalism pandering to mainstream curiosity. However, the distinction between Orientalist and non-Orientalist writing lies not in the amount of cultural details, but in how it is presented: whether indigenous culture is treated as a cultural performance—gathering or documenting cultural symbols merely to highlight cultural exoticism—or treated as a dialogical entity approached with respect to reveal its cultural spirit and vitality. As long as the deep structures of indigenous culture are grasped and revitalized, and its cosmology is integrated into modern representations, with the quantity of cultural symbols determined by the nature of the issues explored, Orientalism can be contained within manageable limits. This demonstrates the deepest respect for indigenous culture and simultaneously dismantles oppositional thinking of self/other and modern/primitive.

With regard to successful literary representations of Native Americans in the United States, whether in the works of Native American writers such as N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968) and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), or in those by white authors such as Gary Paulsen's *Dogsong* (1985) and Jean Craighead George's *Julie of the Wolves* (1972), these texts all explore the modern existential predicament of indigenous existence from the perspective of indigenous culture. In these works, the cultural specificity of indigenous traditions is inextricably intertwined with the problem novel, constituting a form of cultural resistance to voyeuristic pseudo-folkloric representations. Simultaneously, they dismantle another myth in interdisciplinary studies of literature and anthropology—that more cultural details equal greater authenticity. The criterion for determining whether a work capitalizes on Orientalism lies not in the accuracy of cultural

details, but in the depth of its engagement with cultural spirit, since living cultures, as dynamic processes, resist claims to absolute accuracy or authenticity. From this perspective, *Dogsong* offers an illuminating case, presenting Arctic indigenous life in a manner accessible to modern readers while simultaneously challenging exoticist stereotypes. In doing so, the novel enables Eskimo culture to exist as a "living" entity within modern civilization—one that participates in a shared human community shaped by collective vulnerability, crisis, and development.

1.0 The Problematics Addressed in *Dogsong*

For thousands of years, the Eskimos, who inhabit the Arctic Circle, have occupied the lowest rung of North America's racial hierarchy. The term "Eskimo," derived from the Algonquin language and meaning "eaters of raw meat" and popularized by the French in the sixteenth century, reflects Algonquin cultural superiority. Because of its pejorative connotations, Inuktitut-speaking communities in Canada have adopted "Inuit" since the 1970s, with "Inuk" as the singular form. However, not all indigenous peoples of the Arctic Circle speak Inuktitut. In Alaska (USA) and Siberia (Russia), a substantial proportion of Arctic Indigenous populations speak Yup'ik, Inupiat, and Aleut. Consequently, the term "Eskimo" continues to be used primarily in the United States as a general designation for Arctic indigenous peoples, whereas "Inuit" is the preferred term in Canada. Recent linguistic research suggests that the term "Eskimo" may not originate from Algonquian languages but rather from Montagnais, spoken by indigenous peoples south of the Arctic Circle, where it refers to "snowshoe-wearing trappers" and carries no pejorative connotations.

As an ethnic group, the Eskimo peoples are generally believed to have entered the Americas approximately 8,000 years ago via the Bering land bridge during the Ice Age. Though they adapted to the harsh Arctic environment, their population has remained small, totaling about 150,000 today across the Arctic region from Siberia to Greenland (Xie 32). Traditionally, Eskimo societies practiced a nomadic hunting-based subsistence closely integrated with their natural surroundings. In the absence of agriculture or animal husbandry, there was little possibility of exclusive control over the means of production or surplus production necessary for class formation. More crucially, the extreme conditions of Arctic life demanded collective cooperation for survival. As a result, Eskimo communities maintained Neolithic modes of production and social relations for millennia, until European commercial whalers and fur traders opened the Arctic to global exchange and gradually drew Eskimo societies into the commodity economy. In contemporary contexts, wage labor has increasingly replaced hunting as the sole means of subsistence. Geographic isolation sustained Eskimo cultural continuity: despite thousands of years of separation across vast distance, different tribes retained linguistic and cultural similarities. In Canada, the Inuit territory of Nunavut was established across the three northern provinces, while in the United States the North Slope Borough was formed in Alaska. Rich reserves of oil, coal, and gas, along with fisheries, tourism, and strategic shipping routes, have made the Arctic an increasingly contested geopolitical space.

Global economic and political intrusion has posed immense challenges for the Eskimos, who moved directly from the Neolithic Age to modern society without class hierarchies or surplus accumulation, relying

on cooperation for survival. The symbiotic relationship between humans and nature, rooted in shamanic beliefs, has been shattered; subsistence hunting has been replaced by wage labor; and commodities, currency, and hierarchy have come to dominate daily life. Government-mandated settlements have replaced the seasonal, small-group camps formed for collective hunting. The widespread use of animal protection laws, hunting quotas, modern firearms, aerial surveillance, satellite positioning, and wireless communication has rendered obsolete the traditional Arctic survival knowledge passed down through generations—skills for combating storms and hunting prey. Increasingly, children are sent to boarding schools, becoming separated from their villages for long periods and losing their native Eskimo languages. The loss of language signifies a breakdown in intergenerational transmission, erasing cultural memories embedded in songs and oral narratives. The pain, confusion, anxiety, and inferiority resulting from this rapid social transformation demand attention and redress.

Against this backdrop, American literature has produced a notable body of Arctic narratives that foreground Eskimo adolescents navigating cultural rupture and coming of age, articulating their questions and anxieties from a youthful perspective. Among these works, *Dogsong*, a recipient of the Newbery Medal for children's literature, stands out for the depth of its engagement with such problematics. Its writer Gary Paulsen is himself an explorer with extensive experience living in the Arctic. He has repeatedly competed in the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race, a grueling competition spanning approximately two thousand kilometers, and has undertaken sustained study of Eskimo ice-field survival skills.

Dogsong is a poetic problem novel rooted in Eskimo tradition and aesthetic. Each chapter opens with an Eskimo elder recounting episodes from his own past, thereby establishing an omnipresent atmosphere of indigenous oral culture. The plot unfolds within a material environment defined by scarcity, centering on survival-oriented simplicity rather than complex emotional entanglements or interpersonal intrigue. There is no elaborate web of love and hatred, nor deception or conflict among individuals; instead, the narrative focuses on running across the ice fields and acts of rescue—rescuing those endangered on the frozen tundra, and rescuing the endangered Eskimo culture itself.

The protagonist of the novel is Russel Susskit, an Eskimo adolescent who is inwardly confused yet unable to find liberation through formal schooling. To Russel, the Christianity embraced by his father resembles the delicate rose depicted in religious posters—delicate and beautiful, but profoundly detached from the harsh realities of Arctic life. He experiences deep depression and emotional distress yet unable to identify the source of his distress. Having dropped out of school and remained at home, Russel is advised by his father to seek help from an elderly shaman named Oogruk in the settlement to dispel his inner turmoil. During the long polar night, the old man tells Russel stories of the past, leading him into earlier times and immersing him in the ancient wonders of Eskimo civilization. Russel longs to sing the enchanted shamanic songs mentioned by Oogruk, believing them to possess transformative power. Yet Oogruk tells him that only by living and hunting like traditional Eskimos, and by forging a responsive, reciprocal bond with animals, ice, snow, tundra, and sea, can one truly sing songs with magical power.

With Oogruk's guidance and encouragement, Russel begins training a team of sled dogs and abandons the rifle, replacing it with a bow and spear fashioned from whale bone and carefully ground stone blades. Day

by day, Russel gradually masters traditional hunting skills and becomes adept at handling the dog sled. Eventually, Oogruk asks Russel to take him to a lead—the edge of a fracture in the sea ice—where, facing the coming of spring, the old man allows his soul to ascend calmly into the sky. In accordance with the shaman's final instructions, Russel embarks on a journey toward the far northern reaches of the Arctic. Relying solely on traditional bow and spear, he hunts caribou and polar bears as he presses onward. Along the way, he rescues an Eskimo girl named Nancy, who has run away from home only to become stranded in the wilderness. Carrying the gravely weakened Nancy in search of help, Russel witnesses the sun rise above the horizon as spring light finally returns; the long polar night comes to an end, and his heart is filled with renewed hope. At that moment, he seems to undergo a spiritual initiation: a Dogsong bursts spontaneously from his lips. Epic in scope and rich in content, the song overflows with profound gratitude toward all living and nonliving beings of the world. Like the shaman's ascent of the soul, it marks a moment in which the boundaries between human and world dissolve, and the self becomes fully integrated with the surrounding cosmos.

2.0 The Modern Rearticulation of Ancient Cultures

The novel abounds in Eskimo cultural symbols, yet the writer avoids romanticizing cultural primitivism to satisfy voyeuristic curiosity. On the contrary, what confronts the reader from the very opening is the decline of Eskimo culture within a modern American context. Cultural symbols persist, but bear-skin coats are tattered, the rawhide lashings of the sled have loosened, and the sled dogs themselves have long since been abandoned. The lifeless atmosphere of the community and the severity of adolescent social problems expose a deep incompatibility between government-imposed modernization and the harsh Arctic environment. As a result, the revival of a polar cultural spirit—one forged over millennia through wind, snow, famine, and survival—emerges as an exigence and narrative promise. Yet this raises a crucial question: how can an indigenous Arctic tradition be revitalized in a manner that remains accessible and meaningful to contemporary readers?

Paulsen addresses this challenge by successfully giving concrete form to the Eskimo polar spirit and cloaking it, as it were, in a "modern garment of wind and snow". Without producing any sense of incongruity, he allows readers to accompany Russel on his transformative journey from confusion toward clarity and self-understanding across the Arctic Ocean's ice fields—a journey that functions as a spiritual coming-of-age ritual. Consequently, a problem novel that might otherwise have been noisy and embittered acquires instead the purity of a clear sky after a snowfall. Beneath the ice, however, lies the novel's concretized spiritual core: Eskimo shamanic culture. Russel's breathtaking journey across the frozen wilderness represents a modern transformation of the shaman's soul voyage, reimagined within the narrative framework of contemporary Arctic life.

Shamanism is a special belief system rooted in animism, and in early primitive societies still struggling for survival, it assumed almost all social functions. Deriving from the Tungusic languages of North Asia, the term "shaman" means "one who transmits knowledge," and may also be understood as a "spiritual medium" (Znamenski 1). During the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, shamans were often dismissed in the West as "priests of the devil" and seen as enemies of reason and truth (Flaherty 23). When

James George Frazer, a pioneer of literary anthropology, divided the development of human civilization into the ages of magic, religion, and science in *The Golden Bough*, he placed shamanism squarely within the age of magic (Frazer 804–05). However, with the rise of Romanticism in the nineteenth century, which emphasized non-rational qualities such as intuition and imagination, shamans were reimagined as poets, artists, and heroes of myth (Narby 36–37). From the 1960s onward, Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) developed a psychological theory of shamanic "ecstasy," (4) which was later expanded by Michael Harner into "core shamanism" (5–10). In this view, shamanism is understood as an individual's entry into an "altered state of consciousness," effectively decontextualizing shamanism and generalizing it into a psychological practice that anyone might perform. Chinese anthropologist Qu Feng points out that contemporary understandings of shamanism are entirely shaped by Western social contexts, with indigenous cultures excluded from the construction of the concept itself. He therefore advocates adopting the "native's point of view," proposed by interpretive anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926–2006) (Geertz 55–70), to examine shamanism from indigenous perspectives and to understand its distinctive social functions (Qu 149).

Eliade's theory of ecstasy is closely aligned with *Dogsong*. After entering an ecstatic state, Eskimo shamans embark on three primary supernatural journeys, depending on the needs of the specific situation: ascent to the sky, descent into the underworld, and descent into the sea. This tripartite structure is closely related to the Eskimo way of life, as most Eskimo groups migrate along the coastline, living on land in summer and hunting marine animals on the Arctic Ocean Sea ice during winter and spring. Whether flying to the moon—the most important source of light during the polar night—descending into the underworld as the primary means of exorcising spirits and curing illness, or diving deep to pay homage to the Sea Mother (Takanakapsaluk), who guarantees success in marine hunting, these journeys are all fraught with peril. The shamans recount their supernatural experiences to the community, while the people, based on the shaman's physical changes during ecstasy—such as death-like rigidity, strange sounds and dialogues, improvised chanting of mysterious songs, and mimetic movements of diving or flying—attempt to imagine these extraordinary journeys. Shamanic rituals require specific ceremonies, in which community members act as both spectators and participants, sometimes joining together in singing, dancing, call-and-response, and drumming.

Shamanism is founded on animism, and people therefore believe that shamans, as spirit mediums, can traverse freely between the human world and other realms. For this reason, before becoming a shaman, an Eskimo must learn mystical languages, including the languages of animals, in order to communicate with spirits and animals. It is believed that during spirit communication, shamans can understand all languages, including those of animals, and possess special songs for summoning spirits and animals. After spirit journeys (*séances*), Shamans sometimes behave like animals, symbolizing their miraculous transformation into animal beings (Eliade 99). Before Christianity transformed Arctic belief systems, shamans often enacted various hunting scenes or battles between good and evil in their rituals. They would wear animal masks and abandon human form during spirit journeys, assuming the appearance of the animals represented by the masks. In this way, they vividly dramatized the relationship of (both predation and interdependence) between humans and

large terrestrial mammals of the Arctic—such as reindeer, brown bears, and mammoths—or marine mammals such as whales, walruses, seals, and polar bears.

During his northward journey, Russel frequently enters states of ecstasy. In his trance, he imagines himself as a powerful mammoth, dancing to the rhythm of the drum. In the course of the dance, he transforms again into his former self from a previous life—a nimble hunter from a thousand years ago—and with a single turn, he becomes once more a mortally wounded mammoth. Through the solo dance, he continually shifts between hunter and prey, expressing the Arctic animistic belief in which humans and their quarry can freely transform into one another, differing in outward form but sharing the same spiritual essence.

In shamanic belief systems, animals hunted by humans are regarded as spiritually equal to humans and are living beings worthy of full respect. All living things possess souls, and each animal's soul is called its *inua* (meaning "its person"). Alaska Eskimos fashion distinctive shamanic masks modeled on bears, whales, fish, birds, and other creatures. These masks represent the animal's *inua*—the "person" dwelling within each animal. By wearing such masks, humans symbolically become animals, enabling free transformation between the two. Eskimo culture abounds with transgressive legends of love and conflict between humans and Arctic animals such as whales, seals, birds, wolves, and bears.

Humans may hunt and kill the animals for sustenance and clothing, on the condition that they show ritual respect to the animal's inua. Under the guidance of Oogruk, Russel learns that after catching birds, one should place grass seeds in their beaks, and after killing a whale, one should pour fresh water into its mouth (Paulsen 44). An animal's body, like a human body, is merely the temporary vessel for the immortal inua—a metaphor especially apt for peoples who wear animal skins as clothing. Just as human souls are given new forms across generations or through successive reincarnations, slaughtered animals continually return to provide humans with clothing and food. In gratitude for the generous gifts of the inua, which have sustained human life for generations through animal forms, people must perform appropriate rituals of thanksgiving.

In his trance-like dream during the journey, Russel travels back thousands of years to a prehistoric era when mammoths still roamed the Arctic Circle. Accompanied by drumbeats and the repetitive choral responses of his people, he enters a primordial state of profound harmony with nature. In this state, he forms bonds with animals, comprehends their language and modes of thought, and dons animal skins to allow their spirits to inhabit his body. Ultimately, the animal bestows upon him a song, which he later uses to summon prey. Mircea Eliade observes that every shaman possesses a song that belongs exclusively to him, and that no one else is permitted to perform it, since each song originates from a unique and irreproducible spiritual journey (290). This insight helps explain why Oogruk refuses to teach Russel his song, instead implying that the boy must one day acquire his own through personal spiritual experience.

Because the Eskimo people traditionally lacked both written language and musical notation, chanting in ritual contexts was largely improvised. Shamans and audiences interacted through rhythmic drumming, whose regular patterns generated an atmosphere capable of inducing bodily trance and situational hypnosis, thereby facilitating healing or exorcism. The content of these songs derived from visions and events perceived during ecstatic states. As narrative "story songs" endowed with rhythm and melody, they conveyed these experiences

in an easy and engaging manner. Regarded as possessing sacred qualities, such songs were considered unique and non-replicable, which further explains Russel's longing for a song of his own.

Chanting constituted an integral part of the shaman's journey to the spirit world on behalf of the community, while serving simultaneously as a means of reporting these otherworldly experiences. As such, it formed an essential part of the tribal collective memory. The uniqueness of these songs, combined with the absence of written records, rendered them ephemeral, often disappearing with their creators. Yet precisely because oral transmission was the sole means of preserving tribal history and communal experience, these personal songs were treated with profound reverence.

Extraordinary events such as natural disasters, famines, and intergroup conflicts were preserved, transmitted and circulated through songs. Although constrained by rhythm and length, and therefore unable to convey extensive details, these songs ensured the transmission of essential narrative frameworks through their memorable melodies. They also allowed ample interpretive space for successive generations, enabling each to adapt the narratives to contemporary circumstances. In this way, such songs played a crucial role in preserving and passing down the tribe's spiritual heritage. From the late nineteenth century onward, anthropologists and Arctic explorers, including the Danish scholar Knud Rasmussen (1879–1933), began to document these oral histories, thereby leaving a rich invaluable cultural legacy.

In the communal houses of their villages, Eskimos performed drumming—usually using seal-skin drums struck with bone mallets—while singing and dancing. Various events experienced by the tribe were reenacted through these performances. Guided by changing rhythms, the shaman-performer entered a trance-like state and gradually led the audience into a similar spiritual immersion, producing an experience akin to soul ascension. Upon the conclusion of these rituals, anxiety and interpersonal tension were often alleviated, negative emotions released, and psychological balance restored—an outcome crucial for survival under the harsh conditions of polar night. At the same time, important and unusual events in tribal life were preserved in collective memory, providing insight into indigenous values and ways of thinking as well as valuable historical material for contemporary scholarship. *Dogsong* employs a dream-vision narrative in its depiction of ritualized dances the young Russel runs across the barren tundra in extreme hunger and exhaustion, he repeatedly falls into dreamlike states resembling shamanic soul journeys. This approach helps avoid the narrative, logical difficulties of representing trance rituals in contemporary writing, while the dreamlike nature of memory also becomes more accessible to modern readers.

As spring approaches, Russel leaves Barrow, the northernmost human settlement in Alaska, and continues traveling northward across the sea ice. In effect, he is walking away from the sun. This journey into darkness forms a parallel structure with the shaman's trance-induced voyage to the realm of their ancestors for exorcism and spiritual healing. Russel embarks on this journey in order to resolve his inner confusion and to identify the causes of the decline of Arctic life. Exhausted yet relentless, he runs ceaselessly under the moonlight, entering a dreamlike state that resembles the shamanic pursuit of knowledge. Generally speaking, after entering a trance, shamans often encounter the spirits of their ancestors and receive their guidance. They may also struggle with evil spirits in dreams in order to save the afflicted. When Russel enters his dream state, he

witnesses his heroic self from thousands of years ago battling mammoths. He experiences familial warmth, courageous hunting, communal celebrations, shamanic singing and dancing, and devastating famine. This is a history of the Arctic without written records or clear chronology, preserved only in Eskimo oral tradition. Through these visions and hallucinations, Russel perceives the spiritual foundation that has sustained the Eskimo people in their tragic struggle for survival, and recognizes their indomitable spirit, which justifies his physical journey across the ice through an imaginary or hallucinatory reconnection with history. By tracing his roots in such a manner, he repairs the broken chain of history—a metaphor of ancestral guidance.

Although misfortune has been a salient feature of Eskimo life, they have also forged enduring resilience. Today, thanks to modern commercial logistics, the Arctic Circle in Alaska no longer faces the threat of famine. Instead, people suffer from spiritual confusion and a lack of emotional anchorage. Is survival in a modern industrialized environment more difficult than facing the threat of food shortages? After Russel captures the polar bear—the "king of the sea ice"—he has symbolically completed his coming-of-age ritual in the traditional sense. Moreover, his rescue of Nancy, a runaway girl, on the ice suggests that he will become a modern-day spiritual shaman. He is thus positioned to contribute to addressing the modern "diseases" of spiritual disorientation among his people, since one of the shaman's main roles is to act as a medicine man and healer. It can be anticipated that Russel's future quest and service to his community will take place in a modern, demystified way. Drawing on his understanding of tribal traditions and values, he will work toward restoring cultural confidence and spiritual strength while adapting to modernization.

One must possess inherent talent to become a shaman. According to Mircea Eliade, those selected as apprentice shamans are often required to meet certain special conditions and may even exhibit signs of mental abnormality (33). Russel's confusion with the present, his aversion to the noisy elements of modern life, and his curiosity about the marginalized elderly shaman lead him to interact closely with the latter. These traits endow him with certain qualities necessary for becoming a shaman. It is precisely in this regard that Oogruk quietly assumes the role of mentor, preparing Russel as his successor. In the former's traditional conception, shamanic spiritual and healing powers are inseparable from Arctic traditions. Such powers seem to require traditional artifacts as mediums. So he encourages Russel to wear traditional fur clothing, such as Arctic ground squirrel underwear, bear-skin trousers, seal-skin boots, and caribou-skin coats. He also urges Russel to hunt with traditional bows and spears rather than firearms, and to use dog sleds instead of noisy snowmobiles.

As Russel gradually masters various traditional skills, Oogruk decides to complete the sacred shamanic succession ritual before the spring sun dispels the polar night. He asks Russel to pull him by sled to the edge of the fractured sea ice (the lead), where he passes away peacefully as the faint spring breeze blows. His passing is silent, sacred, and serene. It is as if he has left this physical shell behind in the snow and ice, while his soul has ascended to become a celestial eye watching over and protecting Russel's journey toward the far north. As Russel turns away from the emerging southern horizon and heads into the depths of polar darkness, his journey once again forms a parallel with shamanic otherworldly travel. Notably, the author replaces the mysterious shamanic soul journey with an adventure narrative that modern readers can readily comprehend.

In so doing, the metaphorical birth of a modern shaman is embedded in a coming-of-age novel that depicts both harmonious coexistence and constant conflicts between humans and animals. Through the narrative form of travel, the novel presents a psychological journey from immaturity to maturity, creating an accessible and effective interaction between inner transformation and external spatial movement. At the novel's climax, Russel speeds toward the North Pole with the recovering Nancy. Inspired by a spiritual awakening, he cannot help but sing aloud a song about dogs, the ocean, the snowfields, the aurora, and the mysterious interconnectedness of all things in the universe.

Dogsong uses dogs, which are central to Eskimo life, as a starting point, exploring how Eskimo culture can adapt in the age of industrialization. Drawing on oral tradition and cultural memory, it presents the shamanic soul journeys as a parallel narrative structure. Under the rising sun, the winding tracks carved by the sled across the snowfield resemble an ever-expanding musical score, while the racing dogs emerge like leaping notes upon it, galloping and extending toward an unknown future. Guided by his sled dogs, Russel finally discovers his own song amid the rebirth of all things. He runs and sings at the same time, praising dogs and celebrating all living beings in an all-encompassing hymn. This song signifies cultural rebirth and constitutes the self-song of a new generation. It suggests that Russel has found a path for his people's future. Although his song echoes the late shaman's prophecy, he inherits this legacy only symbolically. By moving beyond the traditional shaman's limited role, he reshapes the spiritual power of shamanism. While striving to preserve the spiritual core of Eskimo culture, he fully embraces the conveniences brought by modern productive forces, allowing material life to modernize appropriately. Rather than seeking a return to the past, he endeavors to maintain the integrity of this spiritual essence and integrate it with modern culture, making Arctic life safer and more fulfilling.

3.0 Contemporary Cultural Predicament of Indigenous Peoples

Because elders in Eskimo communities had shorter life expectancies and the population grew rapidly in recent decades, young people made up a large proportion of the population in the late twentieth century. By centering the novel on adolescents, Paulsen not only reveals the social reality of Eskimo settlements but also highlights the most urgent issues of cultural transformation within these communities. In this sense, the novel represents a sincere reflection on the future of Eskimo culture and society. Russel's mother abandons the family, while his father manages to overcome alcoholism only through a superficial understanding of Christianity. Role models for children's development are largely absent in the community, and many adult men exist in a state of disorientation, which reveal that, after several generations of exposure to white culture, Eskimo culture has not been smoothly integrated with modern culture. The choices facing young people thus determine the future of the community. From this perspective, *Dogsong* can be regarded as a serious novel addressing Arctic social issues. The death of the last elder in Russel's community who owned sled dogs and had once served as a shaman symbolically marks the transition of Eskimo culture into a post-shamanic era.

In practice, shamanistic and other forms of folk belief rely on a form of "field effect" sustained by collective participation. The greater the number of followers, the stronger the power of psychological

suggestion. As the community of believers diminishes, the effectiveness of such beliefs gradually declines. As modern science and institutionalized religion continuously disrupt the continuity of folk traditions and suppress indigenous practices, the communal "shamanic field" is gradually weakened. Each generation of shamans feels less powerful than the previous one, while the community increasingly perceives traditional beliefs as ineffective, which leads to a collapse of spiritual faith.

With the introduction of whale-hunting quotas, Eskimos' dependence on hunting has steadily decreased. Meanwhile, the expansion of Arctic air-defense facilities and military infrastructure has shifted the spiritual and cultural life of Eskimos to Christian churches. Under these conditions, aging shamans no longer believe it possible to enter trance states to meet the Sea Mother in the depths or to communicate with spirits (silas) in the sky to influence the weather. Oogruk regretfully tells Russel that earlier shamans could summon birds from the sky and whales from the deep sea, whereas he, having lived and aged in the twentieth century, no longer possesses such abilities. What remains are only visible ritual forms such as song and dance, along with a stubborn adherence to traditional lifestyles (Paulsen 19–21).

Historically, the fur trade and whaling industry introduced by white settlers caused irreversible damage to Arctic biodiversity. In modern times, noise generated by icebreakers, snowmobiles, and power generators has further disturbed wildlife, driving scarce species away from human settlements. As a result, no animals respond to the shamans' calls and songs within their acoustic range, and the "field effect" has been reduced to its minimum. Under such circumstances, Oogruk's role as a spiritual medium becomes obsolete. Rooted in animism, shamanic culture views humans as part of natural cycles, never elevated above other living beings. Once humans become detached from this ecological structure, shamanism can no longer function. With the breakdown of the ecological chain, the psychological foundations of shamanism are likewise destroyed.

Dogsong depicts intense conflicts between old and new value systems within the Arctic human-ecological environment, as well as profound transformations in perceptions of nature. In this new cultural ecology, American industrial values attempt to reshape survival patterns that had been embedded in nature for thousands of years. However, economic models and value systems based on surplus production in temperate regions are fundamentally unsuited to the Arctic environment, where material resources are extremely scarce. With the expansion of tourism, oil extraction, and mining industries, the traditional hunting economy that had sustained Arctic societies for millennia has been thoroughly disrupted. Large segments of the population have been forced into permanent settlement, becoming low-wage workers in the service and mining sectors, relying on modern commercial supply chains for food. As a result, hunting is reduced to an occasional recreational activity to supplement fresh meat. This dramatic shift in economic practices and the emergence of a new work ethic have rendered many Eskimos unable to adapt, resulting in their dependence on welfare. Social problems such as alcoholism, drug abuse, abandonment, and domestic violence have intensified, leading to high rates of crime and suicide among indigenous populations (Pan 204–16).

While education and modern skills training may alleviate the difficulties of social transformation, the localization of universal education in the Arctic has long been criticized. By copying education models from other U.S. states, schools in the North Slope Borough have failed to pass on Eskimo cultural traditions.

Moreover, because indigenous culture has largely been preserved through oral tradition rather than written records, the passing away of the older generation places this heritage at serious risk of being forgotten and lost. By excluding Eskimo culture from formal education, schools fail to cultivate cultural confidence among indigenous youth and are therefore unable to address the cultural identity issues that young people inevitably face during their formative years. The historical and cultural knowledge presented in textbooks—such as dynastic changes, political and military achievements, and world wars—offers little relevance to a people who transitioned directly from a Neolithic mode of existence into modern industrial society and whose collective memory centers primarily on cycles of abundance and scarcity in hunting resources. Even economic systems based on surplus production, along with the complex social relations they create, seem distant and unfamiliar to Eskimo communities. In their collective memory, there is no Cartesian dualistic worldview characterized by a strict separation between subject and object or by opposition to nature. Consequently, Russel gradually loses interest in formal schooling and eventually drops out of school. When people are unable to find meaning in life, they are bound to embark on spiritual exploration. As a result, departure, exile, and constant movement are recurring themes in Eskimo-related literature. These motifs externalize spiritual seeking in the form of physical journeys, constructing a narrative structure parallel to the shamanic process of acquiring knowledge and wisdom.

Dogsong offers a poetic and idealized solution to the educational challenges faced by contemporary Alaska Native children. Through Oogruk's oral narratives, traditional skills and ethnic spirit embedded in the Arctic environment are revitalized. The survival techniques and worldview he imparts to Russel are more closely aligned with the internal logic of the Arctic ecosystem and therefore provide young people with genuine knowledge and immense joy—a distinctive form of wisdom cultivated and transmitted through direct engagement with the physical environment. Returning to tradition restores the dignity of being an Arctic people and affirms a rare form of value in the age of industrialization: unity between humans and nature rather than dominance over it. In this way, it helps bridge the gap between formal education and the Arctic environment.

4.0 Conclusion

Both indigenous self-representation and representations of indigenous peoples by others share a common concern: reflection on the current state of indigenous cultures. Authors continually trace cultural origins, and the structures of their modern narratives can often be found in traditional oral forms. This embedded anthropological framework requires an analytical capacity comparable to that demonstrated by James George Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, as well as interdisciplinary thinking—particularly a solid understanding of anthropological theories and methodologies. In approaching indigenous cultures, writers and literary scholars alike must strive to approximate what Clifford Geertz describes as the "insider's perspective" of cultural bearers. They must immerse themselves in the culture while maintaining critical distance; they must decontextualize local knowledge by translating indigenous experiences into concepts and modes of expression familiar to modern readers—rather than merely accumulating stereotypical visual and cultural symbols.

It is precisely in this respect that *Dogsong* demonstrates deep respect for Arctic indigenous culture. Beginning with contemporary cultural dilemmas, the novel first presents the anxieties and struggles of the younger generation, and then seeks solutions within the Arctic's distinctive geographical context. Rather than employing magical realism to fictionalize Arctic cultural history, the author uses the shamanic spiritual journey—a familiar, collectively remembered narrative form in Arctic indigenous culture—to narrate the ice-field adventure and spiritual growth of an Eskimo boy. While demonstrating a keen awareness of social and cultural problems, the novel simultaneously evokes readers' confidence in the possibility of a successful future transformation of Arctic culture through poetic expression. Although traditional culture continues to decline, living conditions improve slowly, and youth education remains inadequate, it is through the tension between stagnation and growth that the novel creates a powerful "song of life."

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