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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH STUDIES

DECOLONIZING THE FEMALE INUIT VOICE
IN MINI AODLA FREEMAN'S *LIFE AMONG THE QALLUNAAT*

Bachelor's Thesis

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how Mini Aodla Freeman uses autobiography in *Life Among the Qallunaat* to reclaim Indigenous female identity. The main purpose of this thesis is to examine how Freeman's autobiographical writing challenges qallunaat assumptions and asserts Inuit female voice.

The thesis consists of an introduction, two main chapters and a conclusion. The introduction outlines the historical and literary background of the topic. It also introduces Mini Aodla Freeman and her book and presents the main aim of the thesis.

The literature review establishes that autobiography is not a neutral genre but a politically shaped form, and that Indigenous life writing constructs identity relationally rather than through Western ideal of individual self-expression. It also shows that female Inuit voices have been comparatively underrepresented in scholarly analysis, and that the editorial history of the 2015 restored edition is central to any reading of the text.

The close reading in Chapter 2 shows that Freeman reclaims Indigenous female identity in two main ways. First, through scenes of cultural encounter, she exposes qallunaat ignorance and paternalism while repositioning Inuit experience as the more reliable ground for understanding. Second, through memory, childhood, schooling and everyday female experience, she shows that identity in the text is formed through care and relational responsibility.

Overall, the thesis argues that *Life Among the Qallunaat* functions both as personal narrative and as cultural preservation, asserting Indigenous female voice through careful observation, silence, memory and the narration of ordinary life.

Key words: Mini Aodla Freeman, Indigenous life writing, Inuit literature, autobiography, female identity, decolonization

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INTRODUCTION

The Inuit – Inuktitut for “the people” – are an Indigenous population whose homeland, Inuit Nunangat, includes the land, water, and ice of the Canadian Arctic (Freeman 2023: para. 1). Inuit identity is deeply connected to this environment, as well as to community-based knowledge systems and oral storytelling traditions (Freeman 2023: para. 1; Dorais 1997: 296, 300). Historically, Inuit culture has relied on relational forms of teaching grounded in interaction with community and environment – learning through observation, participation and lived practice rather than through formal instruction or written authority (Dorais 1997: 300; Couture-Grondin 2020: 109, 112; Henitiuk 2017: 245). Identity, within this framework, is understood not as something fixed in the individual but as something formed through relationships and belonging to a community (Couture-Grondin 2020: 109, 112). However, colonial intervention in the Arctic significantly altered these systems. Dorais (1997: 300) contrasts traditional Inuit learning with qallunaat (White; non-northern) schooling, showing that formal education was associated with verbal instruction and preparation for wage work. These historical pressures continue to influence Inuit identity and literary expression today.

In recent decades, Inuit literature has gained increasing recognition within Canadian and Indigenous literary studies. Henitiuk (2017: 245) notes that interest in Inuit literary production has grown significantly in recent years and places the restored edition of Mini Aodla Freeman’s *Life Among the Qallunaat* (2015) within this increase in visibility. Indigenous life writing, in particular, has emerged as a significant genre through which authors negotiate identity and belonging. As Rak (2016: 816) argues, autobiography and memoir are not neutral forms of self-expression but politically shaped genres that reflect broader literary and cultural frameworks. For Indigenous authors, life writing can function as a form of witness and political intervention in response to colonial injustice (Rak 2016: 818).

Within this framework, the concept of decolonization becomes central. In literary studies, decolonization can be understood as the process of challenging colonial representations and re-centering Indigenous epistemologies and storytelling practices (Couture-Grondin 2020: 109; Hanson 2020: 24). However, the term should not be used too loosely. Tuck and Yang (2012: 1, 3) argue that decolonization is not merely a metaphor for critique, inclusion, or social justice, but remains tied to Indigenous land, sovereignty and material relations of power. In this thesis, the term is used in a literary-critical sense, while remaining aware of these broader political stakes. For Inuit communities, this involves reaffirming relational identity and community-based ethics in response to qallunaat structures of authority. In other words, identity is understood here not as a purely individual category, but as something formed through relationships, memory, responsibility and belonging. Couture-Grondin argues that Indigenous women's life writing must be read within intellectual traditions that emphasize self-knowledge in relation to others and embodied experience as a source of understanding (Couture-Grondin 2020: 109).

Despite growing attention to Indigenous life writing, female Inuit voices remain comparatively underrepresented in scholarly analysis. Women's autobiographical writing has historically been marginalized, even though it has served as a crucial space for self-representation and resistance (Rak 2016: 814, 822). Inuit women's narratives are particularly significant because they intersect colonial history with gendered experience and everyday cultural transmission. Yet relatively limited research has examined how female Inuit autobiography operates as a specifically decolonizing literary practice. Freeman's *Life Among the Qallunaat* provides an important opportunity to explore this intersection. Written from the perspective of an Inuk woman moving between Inuit and qallunaat worlds, the text combines personal experience with cultural critique and remains an important autobiographical account in Inuit literature.

Mini Aodla Freeman, also known as Minnie Aodla Freeman or Mini Freeman, was born in 1936 on the Cape Hope Island in James Bay and grew up in Moose Factory with her brother and grandparents. Her later life combined literary work with cultural and political engagement. She worked as a translator for the federal Ministry of Northern Affairs and Natural Resources, began her literary career as a playwright, and remained active in promoting Inuit culture and defending Inuit interests through education and public service (Freeman n.d. para. 1).

Life Among the Qallunaat was first published in 1978 and republished in 2015 by the University of Manitoba Press as part of the First Voices, First Texts series, which brings renewed attention to important but underappreciated Indigenous works. The book recounts Freeman's experiences growing up in the Inuit communities of James Bay and her movement in the 1950s into southern Canada and qallunaat society. As both the publisher's description and the Inuit Literatures project note, the text is at once humorous and painful, presenting an Inuit woman's movement between worlds while also recording the larger cultural changes affecting Inuit communities in the mid-twentieth century (Freeman 2015; Freeman n.d. para. 1). The 2015 edition includes additional contextual material, an interview with the author and an afterword that help contemporary readers understand the memoir.

This thesis draws on work in life writing studies, Indigenous literary studies and feminist approaches to Indigenous women's writing. More specifically, it relies on Julie Rak's discussion of autobiography and life writing as socially and politically shaped genres, Élise Couture-Grondin's approach to Indigenous women's life writing and relationality, Keavy Martin's reading of silence in *Life Among the Qallunaat*, and Louis-Jacques Dorais's work on Inuit language, identity and knowledge transmission. It also uses Valerie Henitiuk's discussion of Inuit literary circulation and visibility to situate Freeman's text within a broader literary context.

Against this background, the thesis addresses the following research question:

How does Mini Aodla Freeman use autobiography to reclaim Indigenous female identity?

To answer this question, the first part of the thesis will give a theoretical overview of the main aspects relevant to the study, including autobiography as a genre, Indigenous life writing, Inuit oral traditions and the relationship between gender and decolonization. The second part of the thesis will be devoted to a close reading of selected passages from *Life Among the Qallunaat* to examine how Freeman reclaims Indigenous female identity through storytelling, silence and the representation of everyday female experience.

1. INDIGENOUS LIFE WRITING AND FEMALE INUIT PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

Research on Inuit literature and Indigenous life writing has expanded significantly over the past decades, particularly within the fields of Indigenous studies, postcolonial criticism and feminist literary theory. Scholars increasingly read Indigenous life writing not merely as personal narratives, but also as a form shaped by wider historical and political contexts (Rak 2016: 818). Inuit literature is likewise often discussed in relation to colonization, language politics, cultural continuity and qallunaat systems of authority (Dorais 1997: 303; Henitiuk 2017: 248).

A major trend in existing research is the analysis of colonial impact on Inuit communities through education and language. Dorais (1997: 303) shows that many Inuit respondents perceived a tension between cultural identity and educational needs. Henitiuk (2017: 245) situates recent Inuit literary publication within a context of growing interest in Inuit cultural production and emphasizes the importance of preserving traditions that are at risk

of being forgotten. At the same time, Rak (2016: 816, 818) argues that life writing must be understood as a political genre shaped by public voice, representation and authority.

Decolonization, in this context, as previously explained, does not simply mean the rejection of colonial power, but the active reassertion of Indigenous ways of knowing, storytelling and relational identity. As the historical background has already been established in the introduction, the literature review focuses more specifically on how scholars define life writing, how Indigenous oral traditions complicate Western genre categories and why Indigenous women's narratives require particular attention. Together, these discussions provide the framework for the later close reading of Freeman's text.

1.1 Autobiography as a Genre

Autobiography is traditionally defined as a narrative in which an author recounts their own life, usually emphasizing personal experience and memory (Rak 2016: 814). However, contemporary scholarship challenges the idea of autobiography as a neutral or purely individual genre. Rak (2016: 816) argues that life writing, including autobiography, memoir, testimony and diaries, functions as a social and political practice shaped by power relations. Instead of presenting objective truth, autobiographical texts construct meaning through memory, interpretation and narrative choice.

Memory and lived experience are central to how autobiography works as a genre (Couture-Grondin 2020: 108). An autobiographical narrator does not just record what happened – they shape it, select from it and make it mean something. Rak (2016: 816) draws on Philippe Lejeune's concept of the "autobiographical pact" to describe the implicit understanding between author and reader that what is narrated refers to real life. But she is careful to note that this does not mean truth claims should be applied too strictly (Rak 2016:

817). That flexibility, according to Rak, matters especially for Indigenous life writing, where truth is bound up with memory and cultural context rather than strict chronology.

For many Indigenous authors, storytelling is a means of constructing identity – not through a unified, self-contained account of personal achievement, but through connections to others and shared experience (Couture-Grondin 2020: 109, 112). This makes autobiography a more flexible genre than its Western definition suggests, and for writers like Freeman, that flexibility becomes genuinely useful. It creates a space to articulate identity on Inuit terms rather than within the conventions of a genre that was not designed with Indigenous experience in mind (Rak 2016: 816; Couture-Grondin 2020: 110, 112). It is also useful to distinguish autobiography from the broader category of life writing. Rak's discussion suggests that autobiography, memoir and related forms are not simply containers for personal content, but genres shaped by public frameworks and relations of power (Rak 2016: 816). In Freeman's case it is especially important because her narrative is not a straightforward chronological account from birth to adulthood. Instead, it moves across different phases of life and combines reflection, memory and cultural commentary. The form therefore reflects selection and interpretation before the presentation of a life as complete fact. That kind of genre flexibility is also visible in the publication history of *Life Among the Qallunaat*, which the restored-edition interview describes as an interlacing of James Bay childhood memories with adult life in Hamilton and Ottawa (Fredrickson et al. 2016: 113). The question of genre becomes even more important when editorial history is considered. The interview on the restored edition explains that the 1978 edition excluded many James Bay stories, reorganized the text and ultimately foregrounded Freeman's experiences among qallunaat at the expense of her stories of home (Fredrickson et al. 2016: 113). The 2015 edition, by contrast, prioritized Aodla Freeman's voice and her original focus on James Bay (Fredrickson et al. 2016: 114).

1.2 Indigenous Autobiography and Inuit Life Writing

The gap between Western autobiography and Indigenous life writing goes deeper than style or structure. It is a difference in how knowledge and identity are understood. Western autobiographical tradition tends to center the individual: their growth, their achievements, their singular perspective. Indigenous life writing more often situates the self within a web of relationships and communal responsibilities (Rak 2016: 816). Couture-Grondin makes a point that is easy to overlook but important – Indigenous autobiographies need to be read within their own intellectual traditions, where embodied knowledge and lived experience count as legitimate ways of knowing, not just as personal anecdote (Couture-Grondin 2020: 109).

Inuit life writing, specifically, is deeply connected to oral storytelling traditions (Couture-Grondin 2020: 111, 112; Henitiuk 2017: 245). Dorais (1997: 300) explains that Inuit knowledge has historically been transmitted through observation and participation. This tradition shapes how Inuit autobiographers structure their narratives, often favoring episodic storytelling over linear life histories (Couture-Grondin 2020: 112). Freeman's *Life Among the Qallunaat* exemplifies this, as it consists of interconnected stories that reflect everyday experiences instead of a chronological account of her life (Fredrickson et al. 2016: 113). Henitiuk supports this by noting that Inuit culture has a long history of orature, while literacy in the Canadian context is comparatively recent (Henitiuk 2017: 245). She also points out that qallunaat readers have often assumed Inuit literature to be mainly oral, even though a substantial body of written work in Inuktitut and English also exists (Henitiuk 2017: 248). Inuit life writing should not be read as a break from oral culture but as one way of extending cultural memory into textual form.

1.3 Indigenous Storytelling Traditions vs. Western Autobiography

The contrast between Indigenous storytelling and Western autobiography is central to understanding Freeman's work. Western autobiographical models often assume a stable, autonomous subject who narrates their life from a position of authority. Indigenous storytelling, by contrast, situates the self within a network of relationships and responsibilities (Couture-Grondin 2020: 109, 112). Stories are not merely personal expressions but pedagogical tools that transmit values and cultural knowledge (Couture-Grondin 2020: 112). Simpson's discussion of Indigenous storytelling helps deepen this point. She treats stories as theoretical anchors through which knowledge is generated, interpreted and lived, not as simple narratives or illustrations of pre-existing ideas (Simpson 2014: 7). In her account, learning takes place through relationships, land and embodied practice, which means that story is inseparable from the contexts that give it meaning (Simpson 2014: 9, 15). Read alongside Freeman, this suggests that autobiography can carry Indigenous knowledge not only through what is narrated, but also through how storytelling itself functions as a relational and pedagogical form.

Martin's reading of silence in Freeman's text is one of the more counterintuitive arguments in the scholarship, and one of the most useful. Instead of reading Freeman's restraint as passivity or evasion, Martin shows that silence in the text carries real pedagogical weight – it is tied to intelligence and maturity, not weakness (Martin 2017: 145, 149). Silence can teach without confronting, leaving space for readers to recognize something in themselves than being told what to think (Martin 2017: 150). This runs against how Western argumentation usually works, and that is precisely the point – Freeman's autobiography is not operating within those conventions.

Henitiuk also helps place Freeman's writing within the larger circulation of Inuit literary production. She notes that qallunaat readers have often lacked the tools needed to read Inuit writing on its own terms and that literary criticism has historically been limited by assumptions about Inuit texts as primarily oral or ethnographic rather than literary (Henitiuk

2017: 248). Read in this context, Freeman's autobiographical storytelling participates in preserving and translating Inuit knowledge while also challenging qallunaat expectations about what Inuit literature is supposed to look like. Couture-Grondin strengthens the point by arguing that autobiographical accounts in Indigenous traditions do more than describe experience. They also offer ways of understanding the world that is rooted in lived knowledge and relationality (Couture-Grondin 2020: 112). In Freeman's case, storytelling therefore becomes both cultural transmission and cultural criticism.

1.4 Female Inuit Voices and Decolonization

Growing attention to Inuit literature has not translated evenly into attention to female Inuit writers. Women's life writing has long been sidelined even within fields where it should naturally belong, despite being one of the main spaces where self-representation and resistance were possible for those excluded from dominant literary traditions (Rak 2016: 814, 822). Couture-Grondin is direct about this. The contributions of writers like Freeman are unquestionable, and the field deserves more sustained engagement precisely because what these writes do, carries both epistemological and political weight (Couture-Grondin 2020: 109). For a reading of Freeman, this matters because it shifts the focus away from gender as an abstract category and toward the specific, embodied reality of being an Inuit woman navigating colonial structures.

Freeman's autobiography offers a rare female perspective on Inuit-qallunaat relations. Freeman can be read as an observer and cultural mediator who exposes qallunaat misunderstandings while affirming Inuit values (Martin 2017: 145, 150; Couture-Grondin 2020: 120). Martin's discussion of silence helps explain that Freeman's critique often works through restraint and reflection instead of direct confrontation (Martin 2017: 145, 150).

Decolonization, in Freeman's writing, operates through everyday storytelling as an alternative to overt political rhetoric (Couture-Grondin 2020: 120-121). Dorais (1997: 296) shows that language and cultural practice are central to Inuit identity, even when colonial systems disrupt Indigenous language use. Freeman's narrative reflects this tension by showing how Inuit forms of knowledge are maintained within qallunaat institutions (Couture-Grondin 2020: 111, 121). Her autobiography thus functions as a form of cultural survival, preserving Inuit perspectives within a colonial context (Couture-Grondin 2020: 111, 121; Henitiuk 2017: 245). Couture-Grondin emphasises something that is easy to miss in Freeman's writing – the everyday scenes are not incidental, they are doing the critical work. By showing qallunaat readers their own assumptions reflected through ordinary routines and institutional habits, Freeman's narrative quietly asks them to reconsider what they have taken for granted (Couture-Grondin 2020: 120, 121). The domestic and the mundane become the ground of critique, not just its backdrop.

1.5 Conclusion and Research Gap

Taken together, the scholarship reviewed here makes a strong case that autobiography is never just personal, it is shaped by power, memory, cultural tradition and the frameworks through which writers are read and misread. Rak, Dorais, Henitiuk, Martin and Couture-Grondin each approach this from different angles, but they converge on a shared insight that is central to reading Freeman, that genre, voice and identity are all politically embedded. However, relatively little research focuses specifically on female Inuit autobiography as a decolonizing literary practice, particularly in relation to *Life Among the Qallunaat*. The restored-edition interview also adds an important publication-history dimension to this scholarship. Fredrickson et al. (2016: 113, 114) show that the 1978 edition of *Life Among the Qallunaat* excluded many stories about James Bay and shifted the emphasis of the text toward

Freeman's experience among qallunaat, whereas the 2015 edition aimed to restore her voice and original focus. Any interpretation of Freeman's autobiography must therefore remain aware of editorial framing and textual history.

This thesis addresses that gap by examining how Mini Aodla Freeman uses autobiography to reclaim Indigenous female identity through storytelling, silence and the representation of everyday female experience. More specifically, the study brings together concerns that have often been treated separately in earlier scholarship. By situating Freeman's work within Inuit oral traditions and feminist approaches to life writing, the thesis contributes to efforts to decolonize literary studies and to foreground Indigenous women's voices. Through close reading, it aims to show more clearly how autobiography in Freeman's case becomes a means of asserting Indigenous female voice and knowledge.

2. CLOSE READING OF *LIFE AMONG THE QALLUNAAT*

Introduction

This chapter offers a close reading of selected passages from Mini Aodla Freeman's *Life Among the Qallunaat* (2015) in order to examine how autobiography is used to reclaim Indigenous female identity. Freeman's first-person narrative challenges colonial ways of seeing Inuit people and presents Inuit women as knowledgeable and active subjects rather than passive objects of description. Because the text is written in English for readers formed by qallunaat assumptions, its form matters as much as its content: Freeman's understatement, irony and careful control of tone repeatedly force qallunaat perspectives into view only to unsettle them. Writing in English for an audience shaped by colonial expectations, Freeman's choice of form is itself a decolonizing act. Her Inuit female perspective makes visible precisely what that audience is trained not to see.

The analysis focuses on two main areas. First, it examines cultural encounters between Inuit and qallunaat to show how Freeman exposes qallunaat ignorance, paternalism and limited assumptions about Inuit life. Second, it turns to everyday life, memory and female experience to show how identity is shaped through relationships, child-rearing and cultural transmission. Throughout both sections, attention is also paid to silence, episodic storytelling and narrative style through which Freeman repositions Inuit knowledge and voice.

2.1 Cultural Encounters and Qallunaat Assumptions

This section examines how Freeman represents encounters between Inuit and qallunaat to expose the assumptions embedded in qallunaat frameworks and challenge colonial ways of seeing Inuit people. Instead of offering abstract political arguments, Freeman often works through everyday scenes in which qallunaat ignorance reveals itself. These moments allow her to reassert narrative authority and to present Inuit female perception as more insightful than qallunaat judgment.

In the chapter “I knew him yet not”, Freeman describes being repeatedly asked to speak about the North to qallunaat listeners who know very little about Inuit life. She writes that:

This was when my whole way of thinking about qallunaat collapsed. I used to think they knew everything, were capable of anything, could make anything, just picked what they wanted like magic, could change anything from bad to good. And most of all, I thought they knew all about the Inuit. (Freeman 2015: 11)
Earlier, she had imagined qallunaat as people who “knew everything” and understood

Inuit life completely. The force of the passage lies in the verb “collapsed”, which suggests not a small correction, but the breakdown of an entire worldview. What collapses here is not only Freeman’s view of qallunaat, but also the colonial hierarchy she had partly absorbed herself, in which qallunaat knowledge appeared complete and Inuit knowledge secondary. Freeman does not arrive at this realization through abstract political theory, but through repeated everyday encounters in which qallunaat ask simplistic and uninformed questions about the North. This is also where Rak’s discussion of life writing is useful, since she argues that

autobiography is not a neutral record of experience, but a genre shaped by interpretation and public voice (Rak 2016: 816, 817). Freeman is not simply recalling a moment of disillusionment here. She is also narratively restructuring it in a way that shifts authority away from qallunaat assumptions and toward Inuit experience. In a way, the text reverses the colonial hierarchy of knowledge: qallunaat are no longer the unquestioned experts, and Inuit experience becomes the basis for interpretation. Couture-Grondin's argument that Freeman's narrative encourages qallunaat readers to rethink their assumptions helps here as well, because the scene exposes qallunaat ignorance through lived experience (Couture-Grondin 2020: 120). The scene shifts narrative authority away from qallunaat certainty and toward Inuit experience, making autobiography itself a means of cultural reorientation.

A different form of qallunaat paternalism appears in the chapter "Inuit in the South," where Freeman reflects on a visit by a senior official of the Department of Northern Affairs to an Inuit community. After describing the speech delivered during the visit, she asks, "How could I tell my elder that he did not think the Inuit have intelligence?" (Freeman 2015: 64). The speech itself is superficially polite, since it praises the cleanliness of Inuit houses, but Freeman shows that its politeness is empty. The official says nothing that acknowledges Inuit knowledge or lived reality. The elder immediately understands this and asks why a man of such importance cannot tell them something they do not already know. Freeman's rhetorical question then exposes the assumption behind the speech without stating it directly. Qallunaat authority depends on treating Inuit as people to be instructed rather than people who already possess intelligence and experience. The restraint of the question matters as much as its content. Freeman does not turn the scene into open confrontation, but her wording makes the insult unmistakable. Dorais is relevant here because he shows that Inuit language and cultural practice are deeply tied to identity and self-understanding (Dorais 1997: 296). Freeman does not accept

qallunaat authority at face value. She exposes the assumptions on which it depends and restores Inuit intelligence to the center of the exchange.

The chapter “I am in the middle,” follows a qallunaat man who accompanies an Inuk hunter and, through direct experience, begins to understand Inuit life for the first time. At one point Freeman writes that “For the first time, he sees the Inuk as a capable person” (Freeman 2015: 54). On the surface, this sounds like a positive shift. Yet the phrase “for the first time” also carries quiet irony, because the Inuk’s capability is not new at all. What is new is only the qallunaat man’s ability to perceive it. Freeman strengthens this irony by listing what he witnesses: dog-handling, igloo building, seal hunting and survival in conditions he himself could not manage. Her narrative does not celebrate qallunaat enlightenment as such, it exposes how limited qallunaat presumptions were in the first place. This is also where Henitiuk becomes relevant, since she argues that qallunaat readers have often lacked the tools to read Inuit writing and Inuit experience on their own terms (Henitiuk 2017: 248). Freeman’s wording performs that misrecognition in miniature, qallunaat “discovery” tells us less about Inuit capability than about qallunaat blindness. What the passage finally suggests is that qallunaat recognition has value only after qallunaat authority is unsettled by Inuit knowledge and experience.

Across all three encounters, Freeman's narrative performs the same quiet reversal: qallunaat certainty is shown to rest on ignorance, while Inuit knowledge and perception are repositioned as the more reliable ground for understanding.

2.2 Memory, Storytelling and Everyday Female Experience

This section focuses on how Freeman uses everyday life, memory, childhood and female experience to shape Indigenous identity from within lived practice. *In Life Among the Qallunaat*, identity is not defined abstractly. It emerges through child-rearing, domestic observation, personal recollection and cultural memory. Because Freeman writes as an Inuk woman, these scenes do more than describe daily life – they position caregiving, upbringing and relational responsibility as central to the text’s cultural argument. Her narrative style, especially her use of silence and careful observation, lets everyday experience carry meaning that goes well beyond the surface of any individual scene.

In the chapter “I was dumped,” Freeman presents female experience through a childhood scene of separation. Recalling the moment when she is taken to Bishop Horden School, she writes:

Grandmother was crying – the first time I had seen actual tears in her eyes since I had been in her care. I did not cry. I was too busy looking around and examining the lady who was taking me up the stairs. She fascinated me. Because of her hair and red, red lips, she did not look all human. (Freeman 2015: 103)

The emotional force of the scene lies partly in Freeman’s restraint. Instead of describing the moment through open grief, she places the grandmother’s tears beside the child’s concentrated curiosity. This makes the passage powerful, because the pain of separation is present without being dramatized. As Martin argues, silence and restraint in *Life Among the Qallunaat* do not simply signal passivity but can carry emotional force (Martin 2017: 145, 149). At the same time, the qallunaat woman is described through a child’s fascinated but distancing gaze: her red lips and unfamiliar appearance make her seem almost unreal. In this way, Freeman quietly reverses the standard colonial perspective, since it is the qallunaat figure who appears strange and difficult to read. The later details of washing, changing clothes and entering the routines of the school in the chapter also show that colonial authority is experienced through

the body as much as through language or discipline. As Couture-Grondin (2020: 109) argues, Indigenous women's life writing often ground its critique in embodied and historically specific experience. Here, autobiography records not only entry into a qallunaat institution, but also the disruption of female care and belonging through which that entry becomes possible.

A later school-related passage develops this idea further by showing that resistance to qallunaat schooling is also expressed through women's care and authority within the family. This becomes clear in the chapter "Pain, pain and more pain," where Freeman describes her grandmother's refusal to let her younger brother be sent away to school. She recalls:

Grandmother had never shown any determination – at least, I have never seen her get strong-minded over matters on Grandfather's wishes. She just followed them in peace and with no complaints. Such was the tradition for women to follow that my ancestors created in order to ensure successful marriages. But this time, no one could change her mind – Miki was not leaving, not ever, not as long as she lived. / ... / She ordered Grandfather (which was also against our traditions – to order a man) that they would go back together to the mission. (Freeman 114–115)

The passage presents female experience not as a passive suffering alone, but as active judgment and protection. Freeman emphasizes that her grandmother's behavior is unusual within the gendered traditions she has inherited, noting that ordering a man was itself "against our traditions". Yet this breach of custom is not presented as disorder. Instead, it reveals a form of female authority grounded in care and responsibility toward land and family. Couture-Grondin (2020: 109) argues that such texts are shaped by embodied and historically situated forms of knowledge. The grandmother's fear is not only emotional, but political and cultural. She worries that school will produce arrogance and disconnection from Inuit life. This passage shows that women in the book are not only witnesses to colonial disruption, but also agents who attempt to resist it from within the family. By giving autobiography form to her grandmother's act, Freeman makes female authority visible and permanent – this is part of what reclaiming Indigenous female identity means in the text.

A later domestic scene in "Alikatu" develops this contrast further by showing that Inuit and qallunaat child-rearing are guided by very different ideas of freedom and maturity. When

visiting a qallunaat family, she is surprised not only by the house itself, but also by the behavior expected from the children, who are not “allowed to be normal” in the way Inuit children are. Freeman explains that in her culture children are free to move, ask questions, think aloud and make comments because freedom helps them become wiser. She then adds that “The more intelligent they become, the quieter they are” (Freeman 2015: 8). In context, this statement does not present silence as passivity, but as something that emerges from maturity and understanding. Quietness is not imposed on children from the beginning, but develops naturally as wisdom grows. Martin’s discussion of silence applies here, since she argues that silence in *Life Among the Qallunaat* should be understood not as weakness but as a meaningful cultural and rhetorical practice (Martin 2017: 145, 149, 150). Freeman’s remark, in this context, presents Inuit upbringing as a system that values freedom and gradual growth into self-restraint. The scene thus presents Inuit child-rearing as an alternative framework of intelligence and maturity, one that resists qallunaat norms without needing to imitate them. Simpson’s account of Indigenous learning as taking place through relationships, land and embodied practice rather than through formal instruction applies here directly (Simpson 2014: 9, 15). What Freeman describes in this chapter is precisely the kind of pedagogical logic Simpson theorizes – freedom and gradual self-restraint as a culturally grounded path toward knowledge.

The tension between qallunaat schooling and Inuit forms of upbringing becomes even more explicit in the chapter “Growing pains,” where Freeman reflects directly on adolescence and womanhood. She writes:

I felt mixed up. My mind suddenly became aware of me. Who am I? What am I doing here? What will become of me? /... / According to my customs and cultural upbringing, I was now a woman. But the routines I was expected to follow were not so womanly to me. / ... / But here in school, I was neither a woman nor a child. (Freeman 2015: 147)

The conflict is expressed not only socially, but internally. The short questions at the beginning break the narrative flow and create a sense of fragmentation, as if Freeman’s sense of self can no longer be held together within the world of the school. The phrase “my mind suddenly became aware of me” suggests a split between self and consciousness. This inner

fracture is then connected directly to gender. Freeman does not describe identity here as fixed or abstract, but as something defined within Inuit custom through learned responsibilities. In school, however, those meanings no longer function. The routines imposed on her are “not so womanly,” which shows that qallunaat schooling does not simply educate her differently, but reorganizes the very terms through which she would understand herself as female. In the final statement that she was “neither a woman nor a child,” she is placed between two systems of meaning without being fully recognized by either of them. Rak’s (2016: 816, 817) discussion of life writing is also important here, since autobiography is not a neutral record of experience but a form through which identity is interpreted and narratively shaped. The passage therefore makes visible how qallunaat schooling produces not only cultural dislocation, but also a specifically gendered form of uncertainty. Freeman’s autobiographical voice reasserts Inuit meaning of womanhood by naming the tension that the school tries to normalize. Narrating this disruption is itself the act of reclaiming – by giving these experiences autobiographical form, Freeman refuses to let colonial schooling have the final word on what she is.

In the chapter “Nightingale kept calling me”, Freeman describes her work as a translator in a qallunaat medical setting, where institutional ignorance about Inuit language and dialect creates constant pressure. Later, she explains that she was “glad that [she] had been taught by [her] people how to memorize – the practice that has been used by [her] people from generation to generation, either for remembering stories, events, objects or travel routes” (Freeman 2015: 197). The scene takes place in a qallunaat institutional environment, where medical staff assume that all Inuit understand one another and where efficiency and written note-taking are taken for granted. Freeman, however, succeeds through a different method – memorization. The list of what is remembered – stories, events, objects and travel routes – also suggests that memorization is both cultural and practical. This passage shows that memory in Freeman’s autobiography is not merely individual recollection, but a culturally transmitted practice of

knowledge. Rak's discussion of life writing helps clarify why this matters at the level of genre. If life writing is shaped by cultural frameworks and by the meanings authors attach to experience, then Freeman's emphasis on memorization shows that her autobiography is grounded in Inuit forms of preserving and organizing knowledge, not only in qallunaat expectations of written self-recording (Rak 2016: 816, 817). In this passage, memorization emerges not as a lack of literacy, but as a culturally grounded form of intellectual discipline that qallunaat institutions fail to recognize.

Freeman's emphasis on memorization is developed further in the prefatory interview "One Day, Somebody is Going to Forget": A conversation with Mini Aodla Freeman (Martin and Dunning 2015). Reflecting on why she decided to write at all, she explains that:

/ ... / in my culture, we are not 'writing people'; we memorize everything: everything what people say, everything of where we went, everything what we plan to do. / ... / "One day, somebody is going to forget". So that's when I decided to write the book. (Martin and Dunning 2015: xiv)

This interview passage makes clear in Freeman's own words that writing does not replace oral culture but responds to the fear of cultural loss. Her repeated use of "everything" emphasizes the breadth of memory as a cultural practice: speech, movement, plans, rules and traditions are all preserved through remembering. The statement also reinforces a point already established in the literature review, namely that Inuit life writing should be understood as an extension of oral transmission rather than a break from it. Henitiuk situates Inuit writing in relation to a long history of orature and to qallunaat expectations that often misread it (Henitiuk 2017: 245, 248). Freeman's explanation of why she writes makes autobiography appear not as a simple act of self-expression but as a way of carrying Inuit knowledge into textual form on Inuit terms.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to examine how Mini Aodla Freeman uses autobiography in *Life Among the Qallunaat* to reclaim Indigenous female identity. In order to answer this

research question, the thesis first explored the theoretical background of autobiography as a genre, Indigenous life writing, Inuit storytelling traditions, and the connection between gender and decolonization. The second part of the thesis then applied this framework to a close reading of selected passages from Freeman's text. The analysis showed that Freeman's autobiography is not only a personal account of life among qallunaat, but also a literary form through which Inuit knowledge and female experience are asserted – through storytelling, silence and the representation of everyday life.

The literature review demonstrated that autobiography should not be understood as a neutral or purely individual record of experience. Instead, scholars such as Rak, Couture-Grondin, Dorais, Henitiuk and Martin show that life writing is shaped by memory, interpretation, storytelling traditions, and the cultural frameworks in which it is produced. In the case of Indigenous life writing, this is important because identity is often constructed relationally and through lived experience, not through the Western ideal of the independent individual. The literature review also showed that Indigenous women's life writing has often been overlooked, even though it offers important insight into the intersections of gender, colonialism, memory and cultural continuity. In this sense, Freeman's work belongs to a field of Indigenous women's life writing, but it also requires attention as a specifically Inuit and female autobiographical text.

The close reading of selected passages from *Life Among the Qallunaat* in Chapter 2 showed that Freeman reclaims Indigenous female identity in two main ways. First, she does so through scenes of cultural encounter between Inuit and qallunaat. These passages show that qallunaat authority is not presented as natural or unquestionable. Instead, Freeman gradually exposes qallunaat ignorance and limited understanding of Inuit life. The passage in which her "whole way of thinking about qallunaat collapsed" presents not only the rejection of qallunaat superiority, but also the breakdown of a hierarchy she herself had partly internalized. Likewise,

the passage about the Department of Northern Affairs senior official's speech and the passage from "I am in the middle" reveal that qallunaat authority depends on misrecognition and on the failure to see Inuit intelligence and capability clearly.

Second, Freeman reclaims Indigenous female identity through memory, storytelling, and the representation of everyday female experience. These passages show that identity in *Life Among the Qallunaat* is not formed through abstract definition, but through child-rearing, family relationships, bodily experience, adolescence, memorization and cultural responsibility. The passages about separation from her grandmother, about her grandmother's resistance to qallunaat schooling, and about Inuit child-rearing all present that female experience in the text is deeply connected to care, protection, upbringing and the transmission of cultural values. The passage from "Growing pains" is pivotal because it makes the gendered dimension of the thesis clear – Freeman describes herself as "neither a woman nor a child," which illustrates how qallunaat schooling disrupts not only cultural belonging, but also Inuit understanding of womanhood. The final passages on memorization and writing further showed that Freeman's autobiography should not be read as a break from Inuit oral tradition. Instead, writing becomes a continuation of cultural memory through another form. When Freeman explains that she chose to write because "One day, somebody is going to forget," autobiography becomes more than self-expression. It becomes a way of preserving Inuit knowledge and carrying it forward. This is one of the most important findings of the thesis, because it connects the literary form of autobiography with the cultural function of storytelling and memory. Freeman's life writing therefore works both as personal narrative and as cultural preservation.

Overall, this thesis has shown that Freeman uses autobiography to reclaim Indigenous female identity by challenging qallunaat assumptions, affirming Inuit epistemologies, and giving narrative authority to everyday female experience. *Life Among the Qallunaat* shows that Indigenous female voice is not asserted only through direct political statement, but also through

careful observation, silence, memory and the narration of ordinary life. Taken together, these findings show that *Life Among the Qallunaat* emerges as a literary work that makes Inuit knowledge and women's experience more visible. A more extended study might examine further passages from the text or place Freeman's work in comparison with other Inuit women's writing from the same period, to explore how widely her narrative strategies are shared.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL

ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Anna Udras

Decolonizing the Female Inuit Voice in Mini Aodla Freeman's *Life Among the Qallunaat*

Naissoost inuiti hääle dekoloniseerimine Mini Aodla Freemani teoses *Life Among the Qallunaat*

Bakalaureusetöö

2026

Lehekülgede arv: 28

Annotatsioon:

Käesoleva bakalaureusetöö eesmärk oli uurida, kuidas Mini Aodla Freeman kasutab autobiograafiat teoses *Life Among the Qallunaat* naissoost inuiti identiteedi esiletoomiseks ja taaskehtestamiseks. Töö keskne uurimisküsimus on, kuidas Freeman kasutab autobiograafilist kirjutust qallunaat' eelduste vaidlustamiseks ning inuiti naishääle tugevdamiseks.

Töö koosneb sissejuhatusest, kahest põhiosast ja kokkuvõttest. Sissejuhatus annab ülevaate teema ajaloolisest ja kirjanduslikust taustast, tutvustab autorit ja teost ning sõnastab töö eesmärgi ja uurimisküsimuse. Esimene peatükk on kirjanduse ülevaade, kus käsitletakse autobiograafiat žanrina, põlisrahvaste omaelulookirjutust, inuiti jutustamistraditsioone ning naissoost põlisrahvaste hääle tähtsust. Teine peatükk on analüüsiosa, milles kasutatakse valitud tekstikohade lähilugemist. Analüüs keskendub ühelt poolt kohtumistele inuiti ja qallunaat' vahel, teiselt poolt mälule, jutustamisele ja igapäevasele naiskogemusele.

Töö tulemusena selgub, et Freeman kasutab autobiograafiat mitte ainult oma elu kirjeldamiseks, vaid ka vahendina, mille kaudu vaidlustada qallunaat' arusaamu, kinnitada inuiti teadmiste väärtust ning tuua esile naissoost inuiti hääle. Analüüs näitab, et jutustamine, vaikus, mälu ja igapäevaelu kujutamine annavad teosele dekoloniseeriva tähenduse. Seega toimib *Life Among the Qallunaat* nii autobiograafilise jutustusena, kui ka kultuurilise mälu kandjana ja kriitilise vastusena qallunaat' võimule.

Märksõnad: Mini Aodla Freeman, inuiti kirjandus, omaelulookirjutus, autobiograafia, naise identiteet, dekoloniseerimine

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