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## GLOBAL DISPLACEMENT OF INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES AND THE EMERGENCE OF RESISTANCE LITERATURE: A STUDY OF HOWARD FAST'S "THE LAST FRONTIER"

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### **Abstract :**

*The forced displacement of indigenous communities represents a defining tragedy of colonial expansion and modern nation-building, resulting in the systematic removal of native populations from ancestral lands, cultural erasure, and the violent suppression of traditional ways of life. This phenomenon has profoundly shaped global geopolitical realities while simultaneously giving rise to a significant body of resistance literature that documents, protests, and preserves the experiences of dispossessed peoples. This paper examines Howard Fast's 1941 historical novel "The Last Frontier" as a paradigmatic example of resistance literature, analyzing how it chronicles the 1878-1879 Northern Cheyenne Exodus—a desperate 1,500-mile journey undertaken by approximately 300 Cheyenne people fleeing forced relocation from their Montana homeland to Indian Territory in present-day Oklahoma.*

*The study explores the historical context of indigenous displacement in North America, examining the ideological frameworks of manifest destiny and racial superiority that justified land theft and cultural genocide. It analyzes the specific circumstances of the Northern Cheyenne's forced removal, the catastrophic conditions at the Darlington Agency that precipitated their exodus, and their remarkable resistance against pursuing U.S. military forces. The paper defines resistance literature as a politicized literary activity that challenges dominant colonial narratives, asserts indigenous agency and humanity, and preserves cultural memory against erasure.*

*Through close textual analysis, this study examines Fast's narrative strategies, including his alternating perspectives, sympathetic yet historically accurate portrayal of Cheyenne leaders, and critique of American imperial policies. The paper positions "The Last Frontier" within the broader tradition of resistance literature while addressing questions of narrative authority and representation when non-indigenous authors engage indigenous histories. Finally, the study establishes the contemporary relevance of Fast's work, drawing connections between historical indigenous resistance movements and ongoing struggles against displacement caused by development projects, resource extraction, and climate change. The paper argues that "The Last Frontier" serves as both historical documentation and a call to recognize the continuing importance of indigenous self-determination and land*



*rights.*

**Keywords :** Indigenous displacement, Resistance literature, Northern Cheyenne Exodus, Colonial narratives, Cultural genocide

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### **Introduction :**

The forced displacement of indigenous communities represents one of the most enduring tragedies of colonial expansion and modern nation-building. Throughout history, native populations have faced systematic removal from ancestral lands, cultural erasure, and violent suppression of their ways of life. This phenomenon has not only shaped geopolitical realities but has also given rise to a powerful body of resistance literature that documents, protests, and preserves the experiences of dispossessed peoples. Howard Fast's 1941 novel "The Last Frontier" stands as a significant contribution to this literary tradition, chronicling the 1878-1879 Northern Cheyenne Exodus—a desperate journey of survival and resistance that exemplifies the broader struggle of indigenous peoples against colonial oppression.

### **Historical Context of Indigenous Displacement :**

Indigenous displacement has occurred across continents, from the Americas to Australia, Africa to Asia. The mechanisms of this displacement have varied—from outright military conquest to legal frameworks that legitimized land theft, from forced relocations to the establishment of reservation systems that confined native populations to marginal territories. In North America, the Indian Removal Act of 1830 institutionalized the forced migration of Native American tribes, leading to catastrophic events such as the Trail of Tears. Similar policies were enacted throughout the nineteenth century, culminating in the reservation system that effectively imprisoned indigenous peoples on lands often far removed from their traditional territories.

The displacement of indigenous communities was justified through ideologies of manifest destiny, civilizing missions, and racial superiority. These narratives portrayed native peoples as obstacles to progress, their lands as empty wilderness awaiting productive use by settler populations. Such ideological frameworks facilitated not merely physical displacement but cultural genocide—the systematic destruction of languages, spiritual practices, kinship systems, and traditional knowledge that had sustained communities for millennia.

### **The Northern Cheyenne Exodus: Historical Background :**

The Northern Cheyenne Exodus, which forms the historical basis for Fast's novel, represents a pivotal moment in Native American resistance to forced displacement. Following their defeat in the Indian Wars, the Northern Cheyenne were forcibly relocated in 1877 from their homeland in Montana to the Darlington Agency in Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma). The conditions at Darlington were catastrophic: disease, starvation, and cultural disintegration threatened the tribe's very survival. The Southern Plains environment was alien



to the Northern Cheyenne, and the government's broken promises regarding provisions and healthcare created unbearable hardship.

In September 1878, a band of approximately 300 Cheyenne, led by chiefs Dull Knife and Little Wolf, made the decision to return to their northern homeland—a journey of over 1,500 miles through hostile territory. This exodus was an act of profound courage and resistance, undertaken with the knowledge that the U.S. Army would pursue them relentlessly. The fleeing Cheyenne evaded or fought off superior military forces throughout their journey, demonstrating remarkable tactical skill and determination. The group eventually split, with Dull Knife's band being captured and imprisoned at Fort Robinson, Nebraska, where they endured further tragedy, while Little Wolf's group succeeded in reaching Montana.

### **Resistance Literature: Defining the Genre**

Resistance literature emerges from contexts of oppression, colonization, and systemic injustice. It serves multiple functions: documenting historical atrocities, preserving cultural memory, challenging dominant narratives, and articulating visions of liberation and justice. Barbara Harlow defines resistance literature as writing that "calls attention to itself, and to literature in general, as a political and politicized activity." This literature refuses to accept subjugation as inevitable, instead asserting the humanity, agency, and legitimate grievances of oppressed peoples.

In the context of indigenous displacement, resistance literature performs crucial work. It counters the erasure inherent in colonial projects by insisting on the visibility and validity of indigenous experiences. It challenges the romanticized or demonized representations of native peoples in mainstream culture, offering instead complex portrayals that acknowledge both suffering and agency, both victimization and resistance. Furthermore, resistance literature often becomes a site of cultural preservation, maintaining languages, stories, and worldviews that official policies seek to eliminate.

### **Howard Fast and "The Last Frontier" :**

Howard Fast (1914-2003) was an American novelist known for his historical fiction and commitment to social justice. Writing from a leftist political perspective, Fast consistently addressed themes of oppression, resistance, and human dignity in his work. "The Last Frontier," published in 1941, emerged from Fast's deep engagement with American history and his sympathy for marginalized peoples. Though not indigenous himself, Fast approached the Northern Cheyenne story with respect and a determination to challenge prevailing narratives about westward expansion.

The novel reconstructs the Cheyenne exodus with historical fidelity while employing literary techniques to create emotional immediacy and moral clarity. Fast portrays the Cheyenne not as savage obstacles to civilization but as a dignified people fighting for survival and the basic human right to live in their homeland. He depicts their military



proress not as mindless violence but as strategic resistance against overwhelming odds. Significantly, Fast also critiques the U.S. government and military, exposing the hypocrisy, brutality, and broken promises that characterized federal Indian policy.

### **Themes of Displacement and Resistance in the Novel :**

Fast's narrative emphasizes several key themes central to understanding indigenous displacement and resistance. First, the novel powerfully conveys the trauma of forced removal from ancestral lands. The Cheyenne's connection to their northern homeland is portrayed not as mere preference but as fundamental to their identity and survival. The Oklahoma reservation represents not just physical hardship but spiritual death, a severing of the sacred bonds between people and place that sustain indigenous worldviews.

Second, Fast highlights the agency and strategic intelligence of indigenous resistance. The Cheyenne leaders are depicted as skilled military tacticians who understand both their own strengths and the weaknesses of their pursuers. This portrayal counters stereotypes of native peoples as either passive victims or irrational savages, instead presenting them as rational actors making calculated decisions in pursuit of legitimate goals.

Third, the novel explores the moral bankruptcy of the colonial project. Fast portrays sympathetic military officers who recognize the justice of the Cheyenne cause but remain bound by duty to a fundamentally unjust system. This creates a tragic dimension to the narrative, suggesting that individual goodwill cannot overcome systemic oppression without structural change.

### **Literary Techniques and Narrative Strategies :**

Fast employs several narrative strategies to create empathy and understanding for the Cheyenne experience. He alternates perspectives between Cheyenne leaders and U.S. military officers, allowing readers to understand multiple viewpoints while maintaining moral clarity about the fundamental injustice of displacement. His prose style combines historical documentation with emotional immediacy, grounding the story in verifiable events while creating powerful scenes of suffering, determination, and heroism.

The novel also uses landscape as a character, emphasizing how geography shapes both Cheyenne identity and the conditions of their resistance. The harsh terrain becomes simultaneously an obstacle and an ally to the fleeing people, requiring intimate knowledge that the Cheyenne possess and the pursuing soldiers lack. This portrayal reinforces indigenous peoples' deep ecological knowledge and their sustainable relationships with environments that colonizers viewed merely as resources to exploit.

### **The Novel's Place in Resistance Literature :**

"The Last Frontier" occupies an important position in the broader tradition of resistance literature concerning indigenous displacement. Written by a non-indigenous



author, it raises questions about representation and voice that remain relevant in contemporary discussions of cultural appropriation and narrative authority. However, Fast's commitment to historical accuracy, his respectful portrayal of Cheyenne culture, and his unflinching critique of American imperialism have earned the novel recognition as a

significant contribution to understanding indigenous resistance.

The novel can be productively compared to other works addressing indigenous displacement, including indigenous-authored texts such as N. Scott Momaday's "House Made of Dawn" and Leslie Marmon Silko's "Ceremony," which explore the ongoing trauma and cultural resilience of native communities. Fast's work, while written from an outsider perspective, shares these texts' commitment to challenging colonial narratives and honoring indigenous resistance.

### **Contemporary Relevance :**

The themes explored in "The Last Frontier" remain urgently relevant today. Indigenous communities worldwide continue to face displacement from ancestral lands due to development projects, resource extraction, climate change, and ongoing colonial policies. From the Standing Rock Sioux's resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline to Amazonian indigenous peoples' struggles against deforestation, contemporary movements echo the Northern Cheyenne's determined fight for land and survival.

Resistance literature continues to play a vital role in these struggles, now complemented by indigenous-authored works, films, and digital media that amplify native voices. Understanding historical texts like Fast's novel provides context for contemporary resistance movements and reminds us that indigenous peoples' struggles for justice and self-determination have deep historical roots.

### **Conclusion :**

Howard Fast's "The Last Frontier" stands as a powerful testament to both the tragedy of indigenous displacement and the enduring spirit of resistance. By chronicling the Northern Cheyenne Exodus with historical fidelity and literary skill, Fast created a work that challenges dominant narratives of American expansion and honors the courage of peoples fighting for their survival and dignity. The novel exemplifies how resistance literature can preserve historical memory, challenge injustice, and inspire continued struggle for indigenous rights. As displacement remains a lived reality for indigenous communities globally, works like "The Last Frontier" remind us of the long history of resistance and the ongoing imperative to support indigenous peoples' fights for land, culture, and self-determination.

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