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Native Canadian Voices: Life-Writings of Maria Campbell and Beatrice Culleton Mosionier

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Abstract

This article highlights the resistant writing of the two Canadian Native women writers – Maria Campbell and Beatrice Culleton Mosionier. Through their two respective literary works, viz. *Halfbreed* and *In Search of April Raintree*, both of them have documented the transformation of the Native people, especially the women, from being the object of colonial gaze to finding their own voice. Their works echo the social and political issues that the Native Canadian people have been facing since colonisation. And it is also through these representative voices that the world is introduced to the issues of racial and sexual exploitation that the indigenous people undergo in their day-to-day lives. Both the writers sketch that the only way to reclaim their lost Native identity is by rediscovering their lost ancestral culture and traditions – an act which will not only assist the people in finding their self-esteem and self-identity but also will empower them with courage and spirit to resist the ongoing White hegemony.

Keywords: Native Canadians, Native identity, Maria Campbell, Beatrice Culleton Mosionier

Introduction

This article highlights the dehumanising treatment that the Native people, especially women, face since the beginning of the colonisation in Canada upto the present time. It delves into the two major literary works *Halfbreed* by Maria Campbell, and *In Search of April Raintree* by Beatrice Culleton Mosionier. Both of them are considered to have occupied a place amongst the great pioneering Native women writers in Canada who have taken to writing in order to raise a resistive voice against the colonial hegemonic power in the country. Besides throwing lights on the intricate layers of socio-economic problems of the indigenous people and the political discrimination that they endure, both the novelists have also sketched a major emphasis on the racial and sexual discrimination that the Native women face in this Canadian society that is divided by racial hierarchy.

Literature as Protest Writing

Halfbreed (published in 1973) is an autobiographical novel, and *In Search of April Raintree* (published in 1983), on the other hand, is a semi-autobiographical novel. The various anecdotes and events that these two writers use from their own respective life journeys serve as the facts and truth that women from their community undergo at the hands of the White supremacists. There is a gap of almost a decade between two novels, but the main themes on racial subjugation and sexual exploitation remain unchanged in spite of the period difference as these two aspects of social hierarchy in Canada – between the Whites and the Natives – are still rampant till date.

The European colonisers came as traders before the onset of the colonisation process. Their trade transaction began in around the sixteenth century. Right from the start, the Europeans realised that they could exploit the unsullied primitive state of the Natives. They struck a bargain with them in such a manner that for every expensive animal fur procured by the Natives, they were paid with a measly exchange of invaluable items such as mirror, metal wares etc. which proved to be novel and useful things to the Natives. So, the manipulation of the Natives by the White European capitalists began right from the beginning. They were hired for cheap labour required for trapping animals and for other menial jobs associated

with it.^{1,2}As the years rolled on, the White supremacists further went on to demonstrate their superiority over the Natives through scientific theories and sermons of the Christian missionaries by pointing out that the aborigines were still living in a state of barbarism and inferiority as compared to the European civilization. As Howard Adams points out in his very famous work *Prison of Grass: Canada from the Native Point of View*, Christian missionaries who came to Canada to assist the colonisers in aiding the process of colonisation manipulated the teachings of the Scripture in order to fashion them in a way to serve their ulterior motive in subjugating the aboriginal people. They formulated the concept that the aborigines of Canada were the devil's own children who needed to be eliminated and their lands seized and cleansed with Christianity. By echoing biblical phrases, they goaded that the English colonisers were destined with the "solemn duty to seek out fresh lands to relieve congestion at home. If these foreign countries are inhabited by savages, then, as the Israelites cast out the Canaanites, so Englishmen must take the land away from the idolatrous heathen".¹ They were of the consensual opinion that the Native "heathens" were to be Christianised and in the process if they raised resistance, then they had all the rights to use coercion. The land of the heathens was to "be claimed at any cost for the children of God".¹ These clergymen took upon themselves a new role as a "saviour" – to proselytise the heathens to Christianity and save their souls from damnation. But the hidden chief agenda was to make them loyal and subservient to their economic masters. The Natives were portrayed as psychologically and conscientiously deficient when compared to the Europeans. They were considered as idle, lazy and filthy, and their existence inclining more towards beastly nature, and therefore, they deduced that these people were fit only for subjugation and needed to be tamed. Furthermore, the European imperialists also propagated the false belief that the Native society would not be able to withstand the changing and developing world that Europe was witnessing at that time. As a result of this racial colonisation, White supremacy and European imperialism today have become indelible scars in the Canadian social structure and their impact can be seen in Canadian institutions such as the government, the Church, and the school system. Movies, television, comic books and school curriculum have turned into prejudiced sources through which this presumed image of the Natives is validated everywhere today.

Halfbreed and *In Search of April Raintree* demonstrate the kind of racial discrimination and sexual harassment that the Natives, especially the women, have faced since the start of the hegemonic authority under European colonisation. Campbell's *Halfbreed* begins with the description of the social economic plight that the Natives have to bear. Campbell demonstrates this point through the various housing and social problems that the mixed blood people, also commonly known by the term Métis, of the Spring River settlement area have to endure. It therefore becomes the microcosmic representation of what the indigenous communities undergo due to the neglect under the mainstream government policy. But apart from this portrayal of a dismantling society, *Halfbreed* is also a survival story that charts out the tumultuous odyssey of a Native woman who has braved the constant subjugation and prejudices hurled towards her by her White colonisers.

Colonisation not only took away the political and social rights of the people, it also had a very demeaning internalised effect on them. Within the male community, there grew a feeling of emasculated masculinity. And, since revolting against the Whites remained unsuccessful in procuring their freedom from subjugation, the Native men started to vent their anger towards easier targets, which are their own womenfolk and children. For this inability to stand up against the mainstream community, Native men gradually began to take to drinking. Alcohol itself was an imported product that the colonisers first introduced to the Natives as a reward for their fur trappings in the beginning of the business transaction that transpired between the two communities. Ultimately, hitting the bottle turned into an escape mechanism for the people to avoid facing the ugly reality of failure, the utter shame of it, and the fear to resist their colonisers. This then eventually resulted in the breakdown of the community life. In the first segment of the novel, Maria Campbell recalls the time during her childhood when her father always remained drunk for most of the time once his fight to resist the White government failed.

Sometimes he'd hit Mom, and she would take the baby and run away until he was sober. He seldom smiled and he hardly ever talked to us unless it was to yell. When he sobered up he'd try to make up, but it never lasted long.³

Here we see Campbell's father as a clear example of the growing social disintegration and depravation of the Native community. Native women are often seen as a chattel, more so by the White men. The Native men are held powerless in front of their mainstream counterpart, and as a result of this women become the outlet on which they can exercise their manhood. An example of this where Native women take the backlashes of men's lust and anger – whether it be those of her own Native men or those of the colonisers – is seen in an incident Campbell witnessed as a young child. The Native people often go in groups to market places to sell their wares to the White people. During one of these transactions, a few White men began harassing the women. The Native men could do nothing to protect them but later under the influence of alcohol,

They ripped clothes off the women, hit them with fists or whips, knocked them down and kicked them until they were senseless ... Meanwhile the white men stood together in a group, laughing and drinking, sometimes dragging a woman away.³

Beatrice Culleton Mosionier also brings up this issue of sexual harassment on Native women in her work. Using anecdotes from her own life, in *In Search of April Raintree* Mosionier depicts the lives of two Metis girls – April and Cheryl.⁴ They are sisters but differ markedly in their physical appearance. Being of mixed blood, the elder sister April has more of White features, while Cheryl leans towards Native structure and appearance. Due to “apparent negligence” by the biological Native parents – a very common adjective that the federal government uses against the Natives, both the sisters are forcefully fostered out by the government to White middle class families while they were growing up. Relating to the traumas, displacement from their Native roots, and the “real negligence” Beatrice Culleton Mosionier herself and her siblings faced at the hands of some of their foster parents when they were growing up, she relives and recreates this traumatic phase of almost every “scooped” Native child through April and Cheryl. Due to the forceful removal of the Native children from their biological family, this era which lasted for more than 30 years is referred to as “Scoop of the Sixties.” Though this child welfare practice officially started at around the 1950s, it is commonly known as the Sixties Scoop, or Scoop of the Sixties because of the maximum removal during that period.⁵ The journey towards a reconnection to their Native roots and culture took the sisters towards different endings. While Cheryl became disillusioned with her fight for Native self-determination after witnessing the wasted lives of many displaced aboriginal people which also included her own parents, April, on the other hand, who had been so far trying to cleanse herself from her Native roots, became more and more determined after Cheryl's suicide to take up the fight from where her sister had left. At the end, the narrative becomes a full circle with April coming back to her roots and culture in search of her Native self-identity.

But in this journey of rediscovering their real Native self, the socially incurred stigma of being a Native woman put them at a disadvantage while facing the world outside. In both the literary texts, both the writers have pointed out the issue of sexual harassment that Native women undergo. They are constantly under the hegemonic male gaze. Both Campbell and Mosionier have been victims of racial vulnerability. While a despairing life eventually forced Campbell to take up the profession of prostitution in order to fend for her children and herself after her White husband abandoned her when they came to the city, Beatrice Culleton Mosionier was raped by a few White men while she was once taking a walk on the streets. Mosionier had illuminated this fact in her own semi-autobiographical novel when her protagonist April was raped by some White goons who wanted to settle some score with Cheryl and mistook her for her sister.

The issue of “Rape” is a very common sexual offence that is seen throughout the history of Native women. The colonial mind perceives the aboriginal bodies as unclean and impure, and hence thereby validates the act of raping the Native women

as acceptable. To them, raping the already “impure” body does not amount to violating laws and human rights. Furthermore, to the White men, Native women represent easy virtue and a readily available body. They equal them to prostitutes and hence see rape as a non-criminal act as prostitutes, according to patriarchal perspective, are immoral and have no “tarnishable” honour in the first place.

This racial construct of Native women being immoral helps the White men in fulfilling their desire for sexual indulgences. Beatrice Culleton Mosionier states in her memoir *Come Walk With Me* that the most common belief in the mindset of the European colonisers is that “Native women will go off with any man who offers them booze”.⁶ She was told by her White counsellor that men “pick out women who put out signals that they’re potential victims”⁶ as though women are to be held responsible for the horror brought to them by their rapists. But she puts it very clearly by the end of her gruelling rehabilitation session that the reality is that Native women are potential victims by just being Native.

In the article “Decolonizing Rape Law: A Native Feminist Synthesis of Safety and Sovereignty,” Sarah Deer points out that “[rape] is more than a metaphor for colonization – it is part and parcel of colonization”.⁷ She further explains that this sexual violence does not only harm the physical state of the victim but has a huge psychological impact too. It dehumanises the person and create a sense of worthlessness in him/her.

In this sense, it can be said that the European colonisers had raped not only the physical body of the Native women but has raped the entire nation to instill in them their worthlessness and inferiority when compared to the colonial power. Their distrust and antagonistic behaviour towards the aborigines reduce the Native women in a very unfavourable position. The White community targets their vulnerability, and the act of dishonouring the women serves as a mode to hurt and disempower an entire community.

Conclusion

In both the texts discussed in this paper, the writers have given very vivid details of how Native women are the softer target for racial discrimination. Though the two literary works are published at different periods of time, they carry the same message to educate people as well as to bring the plight of the Native women to a larger platform. The struggle to overcome the overwhelmingly repressive force of the mainstream society is still going on. Both Maria Campbell and Beatrice Culleton Mosionier, irrespective of their different literary period they belong to, have successfully shown through their works their stance to fight the social hierarchy by reconnecting with their Native roots and Native identity.

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