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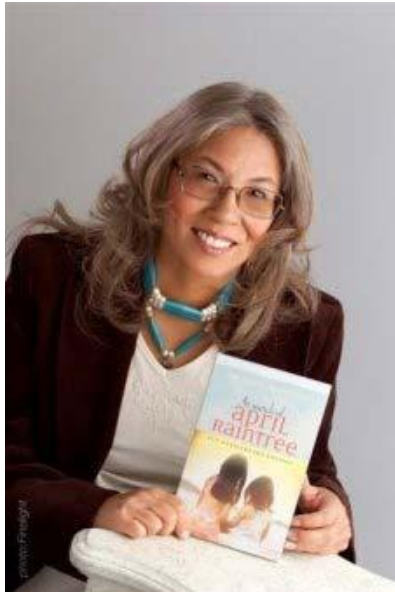
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Beatrice Culleton and Her *April Rain Tree* – Identity Crisis of the People of Mixed Races of Colonization

K. S. Thirunavukkarasu, Ph.D.



Beatrice Culleton <http://www.beatrice-culleton-mosionier.com/photo-gallery.html>

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First Nations – The Natives

In human history, the first nations all over the world became the victims of colonizers. The first nations are geographically separated, and their identities are localized. However, their sufferings due to discriminations are globalized. It is possible to identify a common current of issues, agitations and movements across a variety of first nations, even as they are geographically separated.

As the natives are the victims of the whites, racism becomes a major theme in the writings of the first nations. Racism is a powerful system of oppression. In addition to giving voices to the predicament of the first nation, the first nation writers shoulder the responsibility of constructing the first nation's cultural identities. They have the responsibility to counter the abysmally low image about the natives created by the colonizers and set right the negative image by probing deep into the politics of colonization and racism.

Fight to Retain Identity

Besides, the first nations' writers have to fight for a prominent space in literature to express their voices to re-construct their history as their history is distorted by the white colonizers.

While discussing and describing the formations of cultural identity for indigenous peoples, Kateri Damm says that “Who we are has been constructed and defined by others to the extent that at times we no longer know who we are.” (p.11)

Jennette Armstrong in "Looking at the Words of Our People: First Nations' Analysis of Literature" argues that “the questioning which shapes the initial pedagogical voice must be acknowledged” as these are “the indigenous voices coming forward in written English literature are cultural specific voices.”

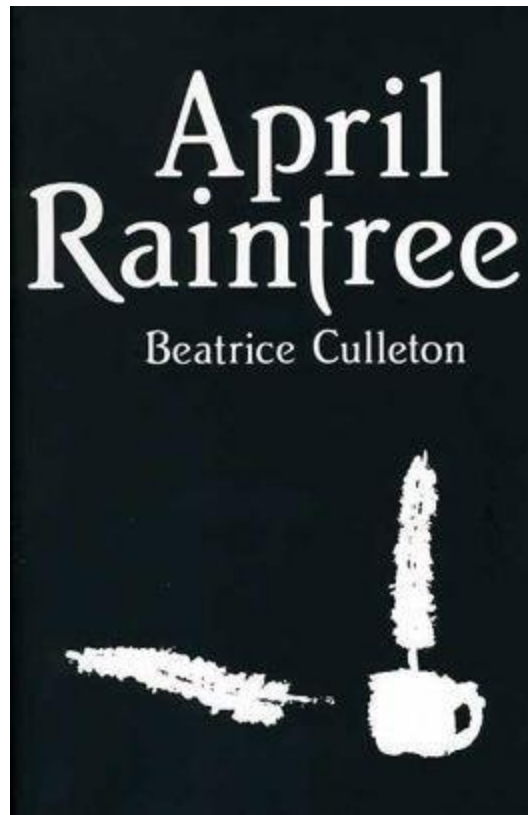
Canadian Native Women

The suffering and struggles of the Canadian native women are representative of the suffering and struggles of the first nations. The native Canadian women are the victims of triple colonization, the first being Canadian in the post-colonial period, the second being the natives and the third being women. Mixed parentage of European and First Nations further adds to the suffering and complexity.

Maria Campbell, Beatrice Culleton, Neamette C. Amstrong and Lee Maracle are recognized Canadian native women writers. They embark upon the task of reconstructing and re-defining the native cultural identities in their writings. Jeanette Armstrong, in her “The disempowerment of first North American Native peopled and Empowerment through their writing,” expresses that “Our task is twofold. To examine the past and culturally affirm toward a new future.” (P.210)

Beatrice Culleton and Her *April Rain Tree*

Beatrice Culleton, a Canadian native woman writer, tries to recreate the history of *metis* (people who trace their descent to mixed parentage of Europeans and First Nations tribes of Canada) by recounting the life history of two *metis* sisters April Rain Tree and Cheryl Rain Tree. April serves as a foil to Cheryl in their search for identities. April negates her *metis* identity by following the culture of whites whereas her sister Cheryl affirms her *metis* identity through her search for cultural roots.



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The *metis* of the Red River have evolved a distinct culture of their own by embracing values observed from their aboriginal and European roots. In this novel, Beatrice Culleton portrays the difficulties that April and Cheryl face in order to maintain a positive identity of being *metis*. The problems faced by these two *metis* sisters are compounded by poverty and the larger society's misunderstanding and negative perception of native people.

Mixed Blood – Seeking a Place of Honor

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Beatrice Culleton and Her April Rain Tree – Identity Crisis of the People of Mixed Races of Colonization

The father of the metis sisters Henry Rain Tree is a man of mixed blood but dominated by Indian and their mother Alice is Part Irish and part *ljibiway*, a first nation community. Between the two sisters, April inherits the looks of her mother and so she can easily pass off for a First Nations tribal person, whereas her sister Cheryl inherits the looks of her father and so her colour and features proclaim that she is a First Nations tribal person. When April plays in the public garden along with her sister Cheryl she notices that there are two groups of children: the whiter group of children are hale and healthy and clean, whereas the native children are dirty and ugly with their rugged dresses. The white children do not mingle with the metis sisters and at the same time they keep passing despicable remarks at them.

Living in Foster Homes – Distinct Identities and Distinct World Views

The two sisters are separated from their parents and are placed under the care of their foster-parents by the social workers. They are told that their parents are sick and poor and so they have to be under the care of their foster-parents. So the children's destiny is decided by the whims and fancies of their foster parents. April's ordeal begins with her foster parents, Mr. and Mrs. Re Doiser. April is reprimanded not for her laziness and dirty habits but for her being a half breed. Mrs. Re Doiser has strong negative opinions about the half breeds imprinted in her mind. She considers that April is a shame, cultureless and without character.

However April tries, she is not able to please her foster-mother. Besides, the two children of Mrs. Re Doiser, Maggie and Ricky, always treat April with contempt. April is not able to share her plight with anybody, not even with the social worker Mrs. Sample, who has brought April to Mrs. Re Doiser's home. Even she cannot share her agony with her father during the 'sisters' visit at the community centre once in a while as Henry April Rain Tree does not care about his daughters.

Even in the school bus, April is teased for being a half breed. All the painful experience, having a half-breed makes April to develop negative opinion about the metis and other First Nations tribal persons and she never wants to be one of them:

It seems to me that what I read and what I heard indicated that metis and Indians were inclined to be alcoholics. I guess that was because they were a weak people. Oh they were put down more than anyone else but then, don't they deserve it? Any ways, I could pass for a pure white person. I could say I was part French and part Irish. If I had to, I could even change the spelling of my name Rain tree looked like one of these Indian names but if I changed the spelling of Rain Try that could pay for frisk. And when I grew up I wouldn't be poor; I'd be rich. Being half-breed meant being poor and dirty. It meant being weak and having to drink it meant being ugly and stupid.

Avoiding Half-bred People

Since April feels that the half-bred people are weak, dirty and prone to drinking, she wants to assume the positive identity of the whites by following the life style of the white people. She is happy that she is able to mingle with others easily because no one takes her for a half-breed. Her rich and aristocratic looks help her hide her real identity, and so she marries a white person, Bob Radcliff because she wants what white society can give (p.85) and *metis* connotes that the person is a have-not (p.85). But Cheryl does not like her sister marrying a White man. She is afraid that her sister may not enjoy dignity, respect and honour in the white family once they come to know the identity of April.

Agony Even in Adult Life

As Cheryl apprehends, April's mother-in-law treats April with contempt and April is allowed to do the things dictated by her mother-in-law. April has neither freedom nor respect but has comfort and money of her husband. But her husband is not honest as he has been having an affair with the stage actress secretly. Having come to know about the affair, April applies for divorce and settles with a huge divorce compensation. Later April wants to settle down with her sister Cheryl.

But April's pride of having the looks of the white and her ability pass off as a white person has been crumpled into pieces. When she is gang-raped by three white men, she wonders how the rapists identified her and called her an 'ungrateful squaw' (p.111) and 'dirty squaw' (p.115). The rape incident rudely awakes April from her white syndrome and forces her to realize her that real identity lies in being *metis*. April's search for her parents reinforces her commitment towards her people as she comes to know more and more about them.

Pride in Native Identity

Cheryl, the younger sister of April, is always proud of her native identity. She never feels that being a half-breed is a shameful thing. Her pride in her heritage marks her read the story of the *metis* rebel Louris Rebel, even in her young age. She wants to become a social worker in order to help the abandoned children of the natives.

Cheryl strongly believes that the whites as the colonizers have distorted the truth in history purposely in order to create a negative image about the natives. They gained a moral victory over the natives by proving that *metis* or people of First Nations tribes are inferior and the whites are the superior. When the history teacher teaches the history about the native people that they have scalped, tortured and massacred brave white explorers and missionaries, Cheryl loudly opposes "They are wrong. Because it was written by white men who had a lot to cover up. And I'm not going to learn a bunch of lies" (p.41).

Determination to Help Half-bred People

Cheryl considers that her life mission is to restore the lowered esteem of the natives by bringing out the real history of their people:

"You probably don't agree with me, do you, April? But history should be an unbiased representation of the facts. And if then and if they show one side, they ought to show the other side equally. Any ways, I'm writing the metis side of things but just for myself" (p.63).

Being a teenager, Cheryl has a strong spirit to help her race but unfortunately, she doesn't have the patience and the experience to handle the adverse situation. When she faces the adverse situation, she doesn't have the courage to brave it through but yields to it without the semblance of fight that she is known for.

When Cheryl has been young, her sister April fantasizes Cheryl's memory by feeding very positive image about their parents when Cheryl starts searching for her parents, taking the clue from her sister April. The fantasy bursts like a bubble. She finds that her father is a chronic alcoholic and gutter-creature and her mother kills herself unable to shoulder the responsibility. Cheryl's discovery about the parents has dealt a heavy blow and Cheryl has none to share her agony as her dear sister April moves away from her mentally by adopting the white way of life after marrying Bob Radcliff.

Legacy Continues?

When April discovers that Cheryl is no better than any ordinary metis girl prone to alcoholism, stealing and whoring, she is shocked. When she understands that she is also a party to what happened to Cheryl by not allowing her to come nearer her, she is upset and wants to make amends by adopting the son of Cheryl Henry Liberty Rain Tree.

When April meets Nancy, who is a metis girl, prone to alcohol and raped by her father in his drunken state, Nancy tells April that Cheryl rehabilitated her by her generous activity. After learning about Cheryl, April wants to start her mission from where Cheryl has left once accepting her people and the son of Cheryl.

April realizes:

I had used the words, "my people, and our people" and meant them. The denial had been lifted from my spirit. It was tragic that it had taken Cheryl's death to bring me to accept my identity (p.184)

April, all along, tries to hide her identity by adopting the life of the whites but the gang rape reveals that her looks cannot help her hide her real identity. April's new awakening about her metis identity is the result of Cheryl's discovery of their parents and Cheryl's subsequent

sufferings. Ultimately April realizes that her salvation lies not in her false identity but in her being metis which is her real identity.

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K. S. Thirunavukkarasu, Ph.D.
Department of English
GTJ Engineering College
Chittoor-Cuddalore Main Road, Kaniyambadi
Vellore-632102
Tamilnadu, India
ksthiru_37@yahoo.com