

A Transcultural Approach to the Subaltern Identity of the Metis/ Halfbreeds in Beatrice Culleton Mosionier's *In Search of April Raintree*

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Transculturation refers to the process in which there is transfer of cultural activities between divergent ethnic groups through cultural practices, linguistic, literary structure and social behaviour etc.,. Mostly the dominant ethnic culture plays a leading role and the subaltern community tend to adapt it in order to gain appreciation of the dominant community on a contrary the dominant community tries to whitewash the subaltern for their convenience. Mostly the subaltern adhere to the hegemony of the dominant group and metamorphosis themselves to fix themselves within frame designed by the dominant group.

According to Meredith, "In postcolonial discourse, it is celebrated and privileged as a kind of superior cultural intelligence owing to the advantage of in-betweenness the stadding of two cultures and the consequent ability to negotiate the difference."

The article aims to peep through the transcultural traces in the characteristic of the metis sisters April Raintree and Cheryl Raintree. Their response to the existing hegemony of the white society. Beatrice Mosionier who was formally known as Culleton is a renowned metis writer. In her novels she tries to portray the sufferings of the metis community the subaltern community of Canada. Culleton's metis identity adds an autobiographical flavour to her novels.

April and Cheryl are divergent in their transcultural attitude though they belong to same subaltern society. The reason for this was their divergent skin tone.

"My father, Henry Raintree, was a mixed blood,.....

.....my sister Cheryl, who was eighteen months younger than me,

had inherited his looks.....

.....my mother, Alice, on the other hand, was part Irish and part Ojibway,

like her I had pale skin." (Culleton 11)

April in her appearance inherits her mother by having a pale skin tone which insists her to expose her as a white. It was April who vaguely remembers her parents and their lifestyle to some extinct and Cheryl was too young when she gets separated from their parents and she barely remembers anything. Therefore from the very young age April dislike of being a meti she hate to reveal her identity. In the case of April the transcultural bond was between the meti culture and the culture of the dominant white society. Though at times she felt alienated in the house of the Dion's it was obvious that she felt more comfortable at her foster houses than in her own house with her parents.

April's hate for her parents and her meti identity began to reach its peek when she begins to realize the truth that her parents were addicted to achololism.

“Liars that's what you are, all those promises of getting well.

All those lies about taking medicine.....

.....You never cared about us,

.....I hate you both for lying to us. I hope I never see you again.” (Culleton 47)

After realizing the truth about her identity April attempts to fix herself in the frame of the white society. According to her the colour of her skin was the only loophole to wrap her identity. Tempted by this fallacy she tries to construct her future. She wants to live the life of a white women this made her to break her ties from her own sister Cheryl. April believed that marrying a white man will whitewash her. Therefore she marries Bob Radcliff but her marriage life does not turned out to be successful. However she strives hard to fit to dominant society truth begin to flash her subaltern identity. April hates mirroring herself as a metis but finally when she was raped she realizes that all her attempt to whitewash her only ends up in vain. The uncouth vocabulary and the derogatory terms used by the men who raped her put to shock ,she even wonders how the rapists were able to identity her as a metis woman in spite of her pale skin. But this incident hit hardly and proved that the assumptions that she was carrying about her pale skin tone becomes vacuum. After that tragic incident April had to accept her identity. Clinging to the white society no more sounds meaningful to her.

On a contrary with Cheryl the transcultural clutches took an entirely different dimension. Cheryl's transcultural notions are between the metis and natives of Canada. There was difference in white people's attitude towards the metis and the natives. In order to highlight this differentiation Culleton has purposefully made use of the term 'metis'.

“Oh, I've read about Indians. Beautiful people they are.

But you're not exactly Indians are you? What is the proper word for people like you?”

One asked.

“Women,” Cheryl replied instantly.

No, no I mean nationality?” (Culleton 107)

In the Canadian society the metis/ halfbreeds belong to the subaltern section of the society. They were neither accepted in the dominant white society nor in the Native American Society they termed them as halfbreeds. Cheryl was in between the metis culture and Native American culture. She says to April “I wish we were whole Indians.” Even from a young age Cheryl develops a notion of belonging to Native American society. Consciously or unconsciously she never tries to differentiate between metis and native society. She always puts herself in the native society. This could be obvious in her imaginative picturization of her lost family.

“I always think of Dad as a strong man.

He would have been a chief or a warrior in the olden days,
if he had been pure Indian.

I'd sure like to know what kind of Indians we are.

And mom was so beautiful to me, she was like an Indian princess.” says Cheryl.

(Culleton 83).

Throughout the novel we could see that Cheryl was very proud of her identity. She was outspoken, brave and celebrating her ancestral identity. She even sounds revolutionary in her thoughts. She was never being able to differentiate between the metis and the natives. This reveals her transcultural attitude. She blends herself in between the two cultures. But all the stereotypes that she carries vanish when she comes to encounter the reality of metis culture.

All the dreams and hopes that Cheryl has been cultivating throughout her life vanish into air all of a sudden by her reunion with her father. The image of her father as soldier as an Indian begins to erode when she sees her father in real.

“All my dreams to rebuild the spirit of a once proud nation are destroyed in this instant.

I study the pitiful creature in front of me. My father, a gutter creature.” says Cheryl.

(Culleton 198).

Her description about her father as a soldier drifts to a ‘gutter creature’ when she faces the reality. The hope and ambition about deconstructing the image of the metis entirely sounds meaningless at that point. The fact was that Cheryl could not assimilate the reality of her identity. This made her life meaningless. This pushes her towards to adapt the ‘Native girl Syndrome.’ The revolutionary personality of Cheryl turned out to be an alcoholic and a prostitute and finally ends up committing suicide. Thus realization of identity and repulsion to adhere the truth has been echoed throughout the novel.

Both April and Cheryl were trapped inside a labyrinth of transculturation. They either look towards the dominant society or wish to travel down towards past ages of the native Indian community. They are conscious and stubborn not to adhere to their own identity. Though Cheryl was portrayed as a person who felt proud of her identity, most of the time the identity itself was not clear. Cheryl never acknowledges the inherent boundary between the metis and the native Indians.

According to Homi.K.Bhaba, ‘hybrids encode within them a counter-hegemonic tendency.’

It was this spirit of the subalterns makes them to encode their voice and existence in the dominant society. Though the transcultural clutches of both April and Cheryl ends up meaningless, transculturation does not ends up with this it further articulates to create a new individual with new image and new hope. They develop a vision for a new world assimilating and accepting their post traumatic experiences. They reconstruct their new personality and only with the metamorphosis of the subaltern community transculturation takes its full form.

After Cheryl’s death things took a different turn for April. Though initially life sounds meaningless for her slowly, she begins to grow into a transcultural person by her reading for Cheryl’s diary entries. The entries give new vision of hope for April.

“All life dies to give a new life.” are the words of Cheryl. It was Cheryl’s death that gives a rebirth to April’s identity. She indulges herself in reconstructing her new identity as a transcultural subaltern and for the first in her life she felt proud of her identity. Cheryl’s words that one day April would feel proud to acknowledge herself as a part of the metis community finally comes true. Cheryl’s son Henry Liberty Raintree symbolizes the new transcultural personality. Cheryl named her son after his father Henry Raintree but the term “liberty” in his name symbolizes his identity.

“Having pondered over what to call you, my sweet child, I’ve decided on

Henry Liberty Raintree. May you grow up to call your grandfather is not.” (Culleton 201)

These are the words of Cheryl recorded in her entries. This clearly proves that she wants her son to develop a heterogenic transcultural identity that she fails to create for herself. She does not want her son to adhere to white dominant society like her sister April or turn out to a useless metis resembling her father nor to waste time in tracing his native Indian roots which would ruin his life. She wants him to realize his identity assimilate it and to develop a heterogenic transcultural attitude. In her final letter to April she conveys her dream about her son Henry and April. This

opens up the windows for April's future. Cheryl's words penetrate through her soul and for the first time in her life she use the term "My people, our people." This placed the novel in the transcultural matrix. April's reference as 'my people' was not the metis or the Native Indians but the metis who wish to break the stereotypical identity of the existent metis identity. April finally realizes the truth that in order to lead a peaceful life its not necessary to fit her in the dominant society or trace back to the native American identity or to trap in the Native syndrome. A hope for better future lies in the transculturation of these cultures. She identifies herself as a transcultural subaltern who with her determination and effort can be a voice of the voiceless subaltern community.

"All life dies to give new life. Cheryl had died. But for Henry Lee and me, there would be a tomorrow. And it would be better. I would strive for it. For my sister and her son.

For my parents. For my people." (Culleton 207).

Thus at the end of the novel April develops new hopes, new future with a transcultural wings she flies to spread her fragrance.

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