

## De-Stereotyping Hybrids/Half-Breeds: A Postcolonial Reading of *In Search of April Raintree*

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“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?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. We’re Canadians.” (Culleton 1984: 91)

What should be an appropriate answer to this question – a question of identity; the mark of identity that comes neither from gender nor nationality but skin color? The significance of skin color in colonization and all the ramifications it carries forward are the focus of the present article. The article attempts a parallel study and analysis of theory and experience – the concept of ‘hybridity’ popularized and widely used in postcolonial theory and the lived experience of being a ‘half-breed’ (as a specimen of ‘hybrid’) in Canada with specific reference to the fiction *In Search of April Raintree* by Beatrice Culleton.

Historically both the terms mentioned above (‘hybrid’ and ‘half-breed’) are closely interlinked. Delving deep into the origin of the term ‘hybridity’, it is biological, drawn from the Latin ‘*hybrida*’, a term used to classify the offspring of a tame sow and a wild boar. Simply explained, it meant mixture, dilution of races, nonetheless with negative connotations. Taking its root from biology, now the term has moved into the realm of social and literary theory. The products of the racial miscegenation as a consequence of colonization, hybrids were seen as an aberration, worse than the inferior races, a weak and diseased mutation. The term carried the overtone of transgression and the aftermath of oppression resulting from racial prejudice. As Jean Benoist points out, the meaning of hybridity in society is not a matter of the recognition of the biological fact that an individual’s genes is the result of ‘a mixture of races’; instead the meaning is derived from the social interpretation of the biological fact (Quoted in Durnin 2001: 132). However, in postcolonial theory ‘hybridity’ is redefined and interpreted in a different way – “the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization” (Ashcroft 2003:118). Breaking away from the stereotypical negative connotations associated with the term, postcolonial theory approaches this “assimilation and adaptation of cultural practices, the cross-fertilization of cultures” as rather positive, enriching and dynamic (Sinha 2008: 4). An explanation of positive reception of ‘hybridity’ is that postcolonial studies concern themselves mostly with cultural and linguistic significations of hybridity. With specific reference to the identity of ‘half-breed’, the term ‘hybrid’ will make sense taking the example of diasporic experience. The migration of yesterday’s ‘savages’ from their marginal spaces to the homeland

of their 'masters' creates a separate space within. This new separate space is what Bhaba refers as "Third world". The present article analyses 'hybridity' from the standpoint of race, and examines the function and implication of 'hybridity' in the existence of 'half-breeds' in Canada.

In *In Search of April Raintree*, the two sisters April and Cheryl are hybrid/ half-breeds in the sense that they belong to the category of third breed or mixed race which have features of both the races, however one dominating. In the beginning of the text itself, April in the role of narrator clarifies the family's racial and ancestral history:

"My father, Henry Raintree, was of mixed blood, a little of this, a little of that, and a whole lot of Indian. My sister, Cheryl... had inherited his looks: black hair, dark brown eyes which turned black when angry, and brown skin... My mother, Alice, on the other hand, was part Irish and part Ojibway" (Culleton 1984:1).

Even as a child, April is conscious, even proud of her partly white looks as she inherited her mother's pale skin unlike Cheryl's. Different skin colors and races hardly mattered inside the four walls of the family. But when the sisters are taken away from their family by social workers due to their parents' alcoholism for voluntary adoption by foster parents, they realize the significance of skin and hair color which thrust an identity on them. The dilemma and predicament, self-pity and envy for whites for being a half-breed (from April's perspective) are obvious even in the childhood games:

"There were two different groups of children that went to the park. One group was the brown skinned children who looked like Cheryl in most ways...But they were dirty-looking and they dressed in real raggedy clothes. I didn't care to play with them at all. The other group was fair-skinned and I used to envy them, especially the girls with blonde hair and blue eyes. They seemed so clean and fresh, and reminded me of flowers...I wondered what their lives were like and wished we could play with them. But they didn't care to play with Cheryl and me. They just called us names and bullied us...We were ignored completely only when both groups were at the park" (Culleton 1984: 6).

The notion of inheriting both features, hence belonging nowhere exposes the negativity associated with hybrid existence. However, there is another way of looking at the fact. David Coley asserts that "if any fact is well established in history, it is that the miscegenetic [hybrid] or mixed races are much superior, mentally, physically and morally, to those pure and unmixed" (Quoted in Mushtaq 2010: 2). In the light of the actual plight that half-breed people face in their lives, the statement seems to be a whitewashing of the truth. April receives a punitive reception as she is initiated into the family of Mrs. DeRosier: "I know you half-breeds, you love to wallow in filth" (Culleton 1984: 26). The predicament that April faces is originated from the fact that she never admits to herself that she is a 'half-breed': "I wasn't a half-breed, just a foster child, that's all. To me, half-breed was almost the same as Indian" (Culleton 1984: 26). Even Culleton's acknowledgement "I had been ashamed of being a native person most of my life" (Interview with Garrod: 81) comes as a clarification for April's experience. No doubt the fiction is autobiographical in nature. The narrative studies how April and Cheryl negotiate their position "in-between" races and cultures.

Whereas April tries her best to gain approval and seeks conformity on the basis of her partly white features, Cheryl moves in the reverse course of the attitude that April follows and appreciates. She serves as a foil to April in the narrative. She imposes on herself the mission to break the racial stereotype of native as dirty, alcoholics and undisciplined people. Though the fiction positions April as the narrator, Cheryl also has her share of perspective within the narrative. The essays she writes for Metis people, her letters to April, her diary entries that April discovers after her death, and her dialogues with April and others serve as a medium of her perception. An analysis of these unravels her pride in her native identity even as a teenager. Especially, the series of letters she sends to April reveals the divergent paths the two sisters take as they grow up. Her protest against History syllabi as “a bunch of lies” is not as simple as it appears on the surface. Whereas April learns submission as an easy way of getting along with dominant white race, Cheryl becomes a rebel against an educational system that attempts to label and stigmatize her and her race. She is able to see through the inherent politics of writing history as she articulates before April :

“You probably don’t agree with me, do you April? But history should be an unbiased representation of the facts. And if they show one side, then they ought to show the other side equally. Anyways, I’m writing the Metis side of things but just for myself” (Culleton 1984: 63).

She dreams of being a social worker so that she can help native people in regaining their dignity of life. She is gifted with strong spirit to help metis people, but does not have necessary patience and experience when she encounters adverse situations, especially when she discovers that her father is far away from the idea she had in her mind as a worthy successor of brave Indians, rather a chronic alcoholic, a gutter-creature, living an undignified existence. The fantasy she shared with April about their parents that their father must have been a brave warrior and mother, an Indian princess crumbles into pieces.

April has the inferiority complex of being from mixed race. As she inherits her mother’s looks who is from First world, she thinks that her pale looks will conceal her actual identity of being a half-breed. She internalizes the stereotypical notions regarding natives herself, and tries to move away from native circle. She believes that

“being half-breed meant being poor and dirty and having to drink. It meant being ugly and stupid. It meant living off white people. And giving your children to white people to look after. It meant having to take all the crap white people gave” (Culleton 1984: 34).

All her romantic relationships are with white people of which Cheryl is very sarcastic. It is only after getting married to a rich white business man, Bob Radclif that she realizes that it is impossible to do away with her biological and cultural roots. Bob’s mother’s detached suggestions and disapproval of her is acceptable to her because of white association she enjoys in social gatherings in exchange. She does not mind being a pretty and petty doll in a white’s mansion. After her divorce to Bob and consequent gang rape she faces, she comes closer to native way of life. Especially, the traumatic rape shatters her illusions regarding her looks when the white rapists address her as “dirty squaw”, “little savage”. As she never considers herself to be a native or part Indian, she is shocked that the white rapists are able to recognize her native roots (despite her deceptive looks) and address her thus. She turns into a victim of native

stereotype as the white rapists believed that native women are promiscuous by nature, and enjoy being raped. Her knowledge at the price of experience brings her closer to Cheryl whereas Cheryl gets utterly disillusioned in her mission gradually. Her fight against “native syndrome” turns futile, and she herself becomes a prey to it. During their teenage the sisters are aware what their social worker Mrs. Semple calls “the native girls’ syndrome”:

“It starts out with the fighting, the running away, the lies. Next come the accusations that everyone in the world is against you. There are the sullen uncooperative silences, the feeling sorry for yourselves. And when you go on your own, you get pregnant right away or you can’t find or keep jobs. So you’ll start with alcohol and drugs. From there, you get into shoplifting and prostitution and in and out of jails. You’ll live with men who abuse you. And on it goes. You’ll end up like your parents, living off society” (Culleton 1984: 48).

Both April and Cheryl consciously try not to be equated with other natives and the usual connotations of liquor, prostitution, and suicidal syndrome. April, however, internalizes the white colonial values and prejudices they nurture for natives in her deliberate attempt not to look like native unlike Cheryl who participates in various programs designed to help teen aged native girls. She is even quite sarcastic of Cheryl’s Friendship centers:

“It’s not the same. I don’t remember the white ones. I only remember the drunken natives. It seems to me that the majority of natives are gutter-creatures and only a minority of whites are like that. I think that’s the difference” (Culleton 1984: 89).

Both the sisters are conscious of their desire that they do not turn into a replica of the usual stereotype associated with native girls, but whereas Cheryl attempts to destroy the stereotype itself, April is happy in the cozy family life of rich snobbery until the disruptive rupture in her marriage and life. She is not even hopeful of vision that there might be a future where white people would not believe in the concept of “native girl syndrome”. Though she does not succumb to the syndrome, she strives for the ultimate gesture of being like white whereas Cheryl resists the process of ‘naturalization’ insisting on re-writing metis history as the first step towards changing the perceptions responsible for the stigmatization of the metis race. It might be argued that as long as a majority of native girls conform to their stereotype, girls like April enjoy the advantage of being different, hence special:

“Helping some of teen age girls avoid that ‘native girl syndrome’ is certainly worth the effort. Remember Mrs. Semple telling us about that? First, you do this and then you do that, and next you do this and next you do that and she had our whole lives laid out for us. Well, we didn’t do any of the things she claimed we would. But the thing is, you’ll never change the image of the native people. It would take some kind of miracle”(Culleton 1984: 90).

The narrative reaches a climax after April’s gang rape which occurred due to a mistaken identification of her with Cheryl, when April’s confidence that both she and Cheryl were successful in not conforming to the native stereotype in their life and character shatters. She discovers that even Cheryl is prone to alcohol, stealing and whoring like other native girls. The irony of Cheryl’s fall into prostitution and alcohol abuse, an enactment of the forecast of “native girl syndrome” by the social worker, is that it happens despite her efforts to connect with native

people and bring positive change in their lives (Durnin 2001: 132). However, only after Cheryl commits suicide April learns that Cheryl had met their father and got to know the painful truth about him and their mother which came as a heavy blow to her. As April had immersed herself completely in a white way of life after her marriage to Bob, unconcerned about Cheryl's life and ideas, she gradually gives in to alcohol, and the very way of native life she dreamed of transforming. Cheryl commits suicide jumping into river from the bridge from which her mother also jumped off, but is still able to transform the lives of those she comes across in her short span of life. When April meets Nancy, she gets to know about Cheryl's generousness towards her in rehabilitating her as she was an alcoholic and raped by her father in his drunken state. April's final realization rings a bell:

“I had used the words, “my people, 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”(Culleton 1984: 184).

Coming to the question of hybridity in the fiction, we “need to distinguish between hybridity as a theoretical concept and a political stance that we can argue, and hybridity as a social reality with historical specificity” (‘Introduction’: 2). The concept of hybridity analyzed in *In Search of April Raintree* belongs to the latter category. The metis or the half-breed people are perhaps the most neglected and the least understood people in Canadian history. Although the metis and the Indians are lumped together in most Native studies curriculums, their histories and their cultures and even their current concerns are different, even if their social problems are often quite similar (Durnin 2001: 5). Cheryl's ambivalent feelings to her metis roots echo the concern as she declares to April “I wish we were whole Indians” (Culleton 1984: 134). The issue of being a metis becomes even more problematic as it does not belong to the either of the binaries of white/black. However, Cheryl's wish to belong completely to Indian heritage poses another binary, that of metis/Indian. It also represents the fallibility of utopian vision of a singular identity. The fiction is an exploration of the issue of how metis people negotiate their position “in-between” races and cultures. Most importantly, the specific use of the term ‘metis’ for native people in the fiction is quite significant due to the complexity and specificity of meaning attributed into it. Rather than using relatively neutral terms like ‘native’, ‘aboriginal’ or ‘Indian’, referring to the people belonging to this mixed native/European ancestry as metis does not seem to be rid of politics.

Whereas the very usage of the term ‘metis’ points at the possible offence intended for off springs of mixed race, theoretical discussion of the term hybridity in the domain of postcolonial discourse speaks otherwise. As explained earlier, the term ‘hybridity’ defies the preset binaries in society and philosophy. Thus, the hybrid identity is assumed to be positioned within a third space, the conjunction of cultures. Due to the peculiar double reality that hybrid people experience and inhabit, they are considered to be better equipped to articulate their experience from a unique perspective. The hybrid's potential is with their innate knowledge of ‘transculturation’(Taylor 1997), their ability to transverse both cultures and to translate, negotiate and mediate affinity and difference within a dynamic of exchange and inclusion. They encode within them a counter-hegemonic tendency (Bhaba 1996). In postcolonial discourse, it is “celebrated and privileged as a kind of superior cultural intelligence owing to the advantage of in-betweenness, the straddling of two cultures and the consequent ability to negotiate the difference” (Meredith 1998: 2). Bhaba argues that hybridity subverts the narratives of colonial

power and dominant cultures. The series of exclusions and inclusions on which a dominant culture is premised are deconstructed by the very entry of the formerly excluded subjects into the mainstream discourse. Hybridity, from Bhaba's interpretation, can be seen as a counter-narrative, a critique of the canon and its exclusion of other narratives. Put differently, hybridity claims that colonialist discourse is ambivalent as the assumed purity of the colonizers is undermined by the act of mimicry, which illustrates its uncertainty. Moreover, the migration of yesterday's 'savages' from their peripheral spaces to the homes of their former 'masters' underlies a blessing invasion.

Academically and theoretically, hybridity as a matter of identity as well as cultural and linguistic negotiation enjoys much privilege in comparison to racial hybridity or being a half-breed. In reference to *In Search of April Raintree* we observe that the highly valued and well researched hybridity in academic discourse when framed into 'half-breed' socially turns out to be undesirable. Even when Cheryl is proud to be a metis, she wishes for a pure untainted Indianhood whereas April makes plans to assimilate herself within the major dominant white culture. April and Cheryl externalize the double heritage of hybridity: nonetheless, both the manifestations not quite content with the reality of being a 'half-breed'. Culleton cautions regarding the loopholes of nurturing a utopian vision of belonging to a unified category.

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