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Identity Crisis of the Métis Sisters in Beatrice Culleton's *In Search of April Rain Tree*

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Abstract:

Canadian Aborigines comprise the First Nations, Inuit and Métis people. The Métis people have served as role models in the Aboriginal community and helped to shape the Canadian cultural identity. The sufferings and struggles of the Canadian native women were depicted by the native Canadian women writers like Maria Campbell, Beatrice Culleton, Neamette C. Armstrong and Lee Maracle. They embark upon the task of reconstructing and re-defining the native cultural identities in their writings.

In this paper I am going to analyze the identity crisis of the Métis sisters in Beatrice Culleton's novel *In Search of April Rain Tree*. Through this novel Culleton tries to recreate the history of Métis by recounting the life of two Métis sisters April Rain Tree and Cheryl Rain Tree. In this novel, April serves as a foil to Cheryl in their search for identities. April negates her Métis identity by following the culture of whites whereas her sister Cheryl asserts her Métis identity by searching her cultural roots. Through her characterization, the author painfully reveals the difficulties that many Aboriginal people face in maintaining a positive self-identity. My paper also portrays the difficulties that April and Cheryl face in order to maintain a positive identity of being Métis. The problems faced by these two Métis sisters are blended by the larger society's misunderstanding and negative perception of native people.

Keywords: Aborigines, Métis, Identity crisis and Culture.

The First Nations, from all over the world, have become the victims of colonizers and their identities are confined. Hence the first nations' writers have to fight for a prominent space in literature to express their voices to reconstruct their history. Canadian Aborigines comprise the First Nations, Inuit and Métis people. The Métis people have served as role models in the Aboriginal community and helped to shape the Canadian cultural identity. Canadian Aboriginal Writers consider the main characters a symbol of cultural rebirth as he or she communicates values that are essential in Native cultures.

The suffering and struggles of the Canadian native women are representative of the sufferings and struggles of the First Nations. Mixed parentage of European and First Nations further adds to the suffering and intricacy. Maria Campbell, Beatrice Culleton, Neamette C. Armstrong and Lee Maracle are some of the recognized Canadian native women writers who embark the task of reconstructing and redefining the native cultural identities in their writings.

Beatrice Culleton, a Canadian native woman writer, tries to recreate the history of Métis by conveying the life history of two Métis sisters through her novel *In Search of April Raintree*

where the two sisters April and Cheryl symbolically represent two ways of existing as Native persons in the Canadian society.

My paper will focus on the identity crisis of these two Métis sisters April and Cheryl where in the beginning of the novel April making use of her White looks, tries to forget her Native heritage and Cheryl with the Native appearance on the other hand identifies strongly with the Native people and the injustices done to them. But later April, who wants to forget, suffers from an identity crisis but survives physically and her Cheryl goes all the way with her people but commits suicide.

April serves as a foil to Cheryl in their search of identities. April negates her Métis identity by following the culture of whites whereas her sister Cheryl asserts her Métis identity through her search for cultural roots. The Métis have evolved a distinct culture of their own by following values observed from their aboriginal and European roots. Beatrice Culleton offers her story to the Métis community so that their voices should emerge from the imposed shadows.

In this novel, Beatrice Culleton portrays the difficulties that April and Cheryl face in order to maintain a positive identity of being Métis. The father of the Métis sisters Henry Raintree is a man of mixed blood mostly Indian and their mother Alice is part Irish and part Ojibway. Between the two sisters April inherits the looks of her mother and so she can easily pass off for a First Nations tribal identity, whereas her sister Cheryl inherits the looks of her father and so her colour and features utter that she is a First Nations tribal person. When April along with her sister Cheryl plays in the public garden she notices that there are two groups of children. The one was the white skinned group of children who are fresh and clean, whereas the other group was the brown skinned native children who are dirty and ugly with their rugged dresses. The white children do not mingle with the Métis sisters and at the same time they keep passing awful remarks at them.

Later, 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 hence they have to be under the care of their foster parents. Therefore the children's destiny is totally decided by their foster parents. April's suffering begins with her foster parents, Mr. and Mrs. DeRosier. April is blamed for her being a half breed. Mrs. DeRosier has strong negative opinions about the half breeds and so she considers April is a shame and cultureless girl.

April tried her best but she couldn't be able to please her foster-mother. Besides, the two children of Mrs. DeRosier, Maggie and Ricky always treat April with aversion. April is not able to share her trouble with anybody, not even with the social worker Mrs. Sample, who has brought April to Mrs. DeRosier's home. She cannot even share her agony with her father during the 'sisters' visit at the community centre which occurred once in a while as Henry April Raintree does not care about his daughters.

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

Since April feels that the half breed people are weak, dirty and prone to drinking, she desires to assume the positive identity of the whites by following the life style of the white

people. Her rich and dignified looks help her to hide her real identity. Thus she marries a white man named Bob Radcliff. But Cheryl does not like her sister marrying a white man. She is afraid that her sister may not relish dignity, respect and honour in the white family once they come to know about the identity of April.

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

When April is gang-raped by three white men, her pride of having the looks of the white and her ability to pass off as a white person has been crumpled into pieces. She wonders how the rapists identified her and called her an "ungrateful squaw" (111) and "dirty squaw" (115). The rape incident rudely awakes April from her white syndrome and forces her to realize her that real identity lies in being Métis.

Cheryl 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 Métis rebel Louis Rebel. She wants to become a social worker in order to help the abandoned children of her natives.

Cheryl strongly believes that the whites as the colonizers have perverted the truth in history deliberately in order to create a negative image about the natives. They gained a moral victory over the natives by proving that Métis or the 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, abused, and murdered brave white explorers and missionaries, Cheryl powerfully opposes that "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" (41).

Cheryl acknowledges that her life mission is to restore the lowered honour of the natives by bringing out the real history of the native people. Being a teenager, Cheryl has a strong spirit to help her race but unfortunately she doesn't have the experience to handle the conflicting situation.

When Cheryl has been young, April fantasizes Cheryl's memory by feeding positive images about their parents. But when Cheryl starts searching for her parents the fantasy bursts like a bubble. She finds that her father is an alcoholic and her mother kills herself. Cheryl's discovery about her parents has dealt a heavy blow. Cheryl has none to share her distress as her sister April moves away from her mentally by adopting the white people way of life by marrying Bob Radcliff.

Later when April discovers that Cheryl is prone to alcoholism, stealing and whoring, she is shocked. When she understands that she is also a reason by not allowing her to be nearer to her, she is upset and wants to make amends by adopting the son of Cheryl and she named him as Henry Liberty Raintree. After learning about Cheryl, April wants to start her mission from where Cheryl has left once by accepting her people and the son of Cheryl.

April's accepting of her own Métis identity, can be noted from her 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" (184). Cheryl's demise has made April to accept her identity of being a Métis. Both April and Cheryl learn how one's personal identity is firmly intertwined with one's cultural heritage and how Métis people live with the confusion of belonging to two opposing identities.

April, all long, tries to hide her identity by adopting the life of the whites but the gang rape reveals that her looks cannot help her to hide her real identity. Beatrice Culleton concludes the novel by stating that April ultimately realizes that her salvation lies not in her false identity but in her being Métis which is her real identity.

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